

The Routledge Companion to Intersectionalities



Edited by Jennifer C. Nash and Samantha Pinto

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO INTERSECTIONALITIES

The Routledge Companion to Intersectionalities is a dynamic reference source to the key contemporary analytic in feminist thought: intersectionality. Comprising over 50 chapters by a diverse, international, and interdisciplinary team of contributors, the *Companion* is divided into nine parts:

- Retracing intersectional genealogies
- Intersectional methods and (inter)disciplinarity
- Intersectionality's travels
- Intersectional borderwork
- Trans* intersectionalities
- Disability and intersectional embodiment
- Intersectional science and data studies
- Popular culture at the intersections
- Rethinking intersectional justice.

This accessibly written collection is essential reading for students, teachers, and researchers working in women's and gender studies, sexuality studies, African American studies, sociology, politics, and other related subjects from across the humanities and social sciences.

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INTRODUCTION

Accompanying intersectionality

Jennifer C. Nash and Samantha Pinto

How do we narrate the story of intersectionality, the Black feminist analytic that has permeated academic and popular feminism since its coinage by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989? The aspiration to offer a genealogy—or even genealogies—necessarily brings us into conversation with long and contentious debates on the origins and usages of the concept. But in this volume, we are focused not on establishing a single story about intersectionality, but on traveling with the term as it is taken up within feminist theory and allied fields, within traditional disciplines and interdisciplines, across histories of feminist activism and politics, and across national boundaries. This book hopes to be a true and multifaceted “companion” to intersectionality not by fixing it in place, but by tracing its known and less known, even unrecognizable intimacies and movements, and by gesturing to where this well-traveled term might still go, investing in its continued critical potentiality.

In this sense, the volume takes Crenshaw’s metaphor of the intersection—and the lived experiences, identities, and injuries where variable axes meet—as a point of departure. Crenshaw deploys the metaphor of the intersection to describe the inadequacy of juridical grammars, like employment antidiscrimination law, to adequately describe or redress the traffic at any given site, in a given moment, that constitutes legal injury as a Black female subject. She also uses the term to describe the inadequacy of both feminist and antiracist frameworks to capture how race and gender operate together, simultaneously and in collusion, to mark Black women’s everyday experiences of vulnerability and injury.

Since her pair of now-canonical law review articles (“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” and “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color”), a host of questions have swirled around intersectionality: is it a way to neutrally describe the multiplicity of identities that all subjects accrue? Is it an “oppression olympics,” with the intersection as a site of accumulation of injury? Is it an analytic strictly “belonging” to Black feminism—and to Black women—that includes an ethical and intellectual imperative to focus on marginalized communities and identities? Is it a way of “doing” feminism, both academically and in the world? Does it dismantle or build institutional affiliations across subjects, disciplines, and infrastructures? These questions flag only some of the robust debates about the descriptive and conceptual term intersectionality, at a moment where intersectionality seems to be “everywhere” and nowhere—invoked on tote bags and protest

signs, touted by diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives across corporate and academic culture, and hailed as the necessary theoretical orientation of any feminist studies curriculum worth its political salt.

This volume refuses to settle these questions; instead, much as Crenshaw aspired to do in offering the term intersectionality, we attempt to reorient these queries around conceptualizing difference. In doing so, the volume expands on Crenshaw's claims about intersectionality in 1991 via her powerful (and less cited) article "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew" which focused on the 2 Live Crew obscenity trial. She writes, ultimately, that:

Fitted with a Black feminist sensibility, one uncovers other issues in which the unique situation of Black women renders a different formulation of the problem than the version that dominates in current debate. Ready examples include rape, domestic violence, and welfare dependency. A Black feminist sensibility might also provide a more direct link between the women's movement and traditional civil rights movements, helping them both to shed conceptual blinders that limit the efficacy of each.¹

Scholars including Patricia Hill Collins, Sirma Bilge, Brittney Cooper, Anna Carathasis, Vivian May, Ivy Ken, Patrick Grzanka, and Ange-Marie Hancock have engaged both the historical and the conceptual weight of intersectionality as just such an intellectual pivot point, a method that promises to shift if not upend the status quo of feminism, of disciplinarity, of antiracist practice and theory, and of the academy. They have done so in very different ways, of course, with some more attendant to the ways in which shifting the origin stories of intersectionality opens up new or occluded conversations about race and gender and others tracing its more contemporary genealogy through the academy with skepticism and correctives that reflect the desire and promise of intersectionality as a tool for future justice.

Without rehearsing a moment whereby we declare what Crenshaw *really* meant by intersectionality, we underline her comments on Black feminism's theoretical capacities to sit in companionship with her metaphor of intersectionality as a crossroads of specific histories, identities, and lived experiences that must be rendered, at various specific spaces and times, into legible description. We begin this volume by imagining, through our own rich and varied field of Black feminist studies but not wishing to limit "intersectionality" to that field, what intersectionality has been and could be for feminist and antiracist studies. In offering three other sites to tell the story of intersectionality below, we seek to add to—rather than critique—the origin stories that now circulate around intersectionality. Some of these stories have included the Combahee River Collective's commitment to thinking about "interlocking" structures of domination as a crucial way of doing intersectional work even before Crenshaw's now-canonical law review articles.² Of course, Combahee's work also centers class (the collective was decidedly Marxist in its approach) and sexuality (the collective was also committed to a Black lesbian feminist practice), which contemporary readings of intersectionality's deep past in Black feminist work often mention but do not dwell on as they tout the analytic's capaciousness. For other scholars, including Brittney Cooper and Vivian May, a deeper look into Black feminist intellectual history reveals that thinkers like Anna Julia Cooper were engaged in intersectional theorizing long before the term intersectionality came to circulate in the academy and in feminist politics.³ In these origin stories, we mark the effort to make a claim that intersectionality has long been the centerpiece of Black feminist inquiry, even before the term intersectionality came into being. We offer our stories situated within Black feminist thought in a different spirit—to consider the various ways intersectionality comes into view when we narrate its origins from multiple vantage points that include intraracial, generational, and transnational conflict. Intersectionality, below, is a question

mark, an impasse, a field of uncertain relations. It disorients the speaking subjects rather than grounding them or its readers.

I.1 Three stories of intersectionality

I.1.1 *Intersectionality as incommensurability*

In 1982, June Jordan published her searing, self-critical essay “Report from the Bahamas.” Like other women of color’s first-person writing of the time, it emphasizes not just personal experiences of injury at the intersection built by whiteness, but the ways that layered identities create complex, incommensurable experiences and politics of the self as a feminist across time, geography, embodiment, and other crucial axes. Jordan’s “intersectionality”—a term that didn’t exist when Jordan wrote her piece—is unceasing, difficult, and unresolved, as she narrates an imagined conversation between herself and the domestic worker assigned to clean her hotel room:

“Olive” is the name of the Black woman who cleans my hotel room. On my way to the beach I am wondering what “Olive” would say if I told her why I chose The Sheraton British Colonial; if I told her I wanted to swim. I wanted to sleep. I did not want to be harassed by the middle aged waiter, or his nephew; I did not want to be raped by anybody (white or Black) at all and I calculated that my safety as a Black woman alone would best be assured by a multinational hotel corporation. In my experience, the big guys take customer complaints more seriously than the little ones. ... I’m pretty sure “Olive” would look at me as though I came from someplace as far away as Brooklyn. Then she’d probably allow herself one indignant query before righteously removing her vacuum cleaner from my room: “and why in the first place you come down you without your husband?” I cannot imagine how I would begin to answer her. My “rights” and my “freedom” and my “desire” and a slew of other New World values; what would they sound like to this Black woman described on the card atop my hotel bureau as “Olive the Maid.”? ... Whose rights? Whose freedom? Whose desire? And why should she give a shit about mine unless I do something, for real, about hers?⁴

Jordan speaks from and at the intersection, not as a definitive space of right feeling or fact, but as a calculus that can just as often occlude, can leave out the “problem” of orientations and experiences of the intersection that one cannot see, can choose not to see. She imagines intersectionality, at the moment of her articulation of the situation at hand, to be inadequate as an explanation and yet invaluable in the “different formulation” of the problem of antiracist feminism. She dares, as a Black feminist subject, to come up short, to fail, and to find in that revelation a way to reframe intersectionality’s generative power—as a mode of description not for individual identity but for relation. It won’t save our or her feminism, but it will keep posing the problem of living and being in the world as a feminist who cannot and will not—and a feminism that can never and will never—get it right, completely, no matter the analytical and object-oriented promises it desires.

Jordan dares to confess this inequitable arrangement without abandoning the project of feminist politics—instead claiming that disorientation as a feminist practice itself through her writing. Here, transnational and women of color feminisms are neither collapsed nor held in hierarchical distinction. They are each invoked as modes of analysis that put precisely the terms that Jordan places in scare quotes in generative crisis: whose freedom? Whose desire? Whose rights? And why should we care about each other, about hearing each other’s stories, about our

own intersectional experiences, across difference? Or, as Jordan asks later in the essay, “What would it mean for us to seem ‘good’ to each other? What would that rating require?”⁵—this after she has an encounter with the food services staff member who is clearly “disgusted” with Jordan’s eating on Good Friday, a holiday that keeps her at her job instead of with her own community. “Neither of us apologizes to the other,” Jordan flatly states while transporting herself back to painful memories of being a part of her own emigre family, of being misrecognized, misunderstood within its identity-confines.

From there, Jordan imagines a structural analysis in this sea of dissonance:

It occurs to me that much organizational grief could be avoided if people understood that partnership in misery does not necessarily provide for partnership for change: When we get the monsters off our backs all of us may want to run in very different directions.

And not only that: even though both “Olive” and “I” live inside a conflict neither one of us created, and even though both of us therefore hurt inside that conflict, I may be one of the monsters she needs to eliminate from her universe and, in a sense, she may be one of the monsters in mine. . . . I am saying that the ultimate connection cannot be the enemy.

The ultimate connection must be the need that we find between us.⁶

Jordan’s writing, like her politics, is urgent, unsparing, thoughtful, searing, and relentless. In this essay, one that doesn’t let Jordan or any she surveys off the hook and nonetheless narrates the hopefulness of transnational organizing across and through difference, Jordan offers a vision of intersectionality as an analytic that “does” something for a feminism sutured through radical difference and mundane points of conflict. This is not an intersectionality-as-method that solves a problem, but one that formulates that new orientation to a problem that a discipline, an institution, a school of thought, or a way of political life really wants to have already figured out. Intersectionality isn’t the only name we can give to this or the only analytic that can pivot established ways of knowing the world. But it is the one that, through Jordan’s lens, focuses on difference as a constant question rather than a pinning down of sides, subjects, positions, and possibilities. Crucially, she imagines and materializes Black women “out of place,” out of the intersections where the US public imagination insists on finding them, trying them, rescuing them, refuting their binds. Like Crenshaw’s call to imagine a legal problem from a Black feminist perspective, Jordan conjures Black feminism that travels, that can travel, that doesn’t have all of the answers but is in difficult conversation as it moves. This is what this volume dares to imagine for intersectionality—an analytic that can travel and be in companionship with other visions, versions, and analytics of feminism, not without friction or critique, but in knowing difference and surprising connection.

1.1.2 Intersectionality as narrative “flood”

If Jordan offers one way of describing intersectionality’s histories and itineraries, thinking about intersectionality’s locations in critical race theory, and in Left critiques of the US legal system, is another way of narrating its histories. We write this at a moment when critical race theory has become (again) a dirty term used by the US Right to denigrate a host of projects—intellectual and political, real and imagined—that engage any form of critical thinking about race. And that is precisely why it is so crucial to remember Crenshaw’s work as a legal scholar, as a Left legal scholar, and as a steward of a tradition that was already forming

when she arrived as a graduate student at Harvard Law School in 1981. By the early 1980s, a larger intellectual movement was underway in the legal academy, one that had grown out of—and apart from—critical legal studies and that emphasized the persistence of US racism and the role of law in perpetuating rather than ameliorating racial violence. This was a movement that not only dismantled the mythology that law could be color blind, but that also suggested that color blindness is its own form of injury. Indeed, critical race theorists argued that race-based—rather than race-neutral—remedies are required to imagine something like racial justice.

This group of scholars also insisted on “looking to the bottom,” to borrow Mari Mastuda’s term, using new tools—myths, storytelling, genre-bending, parable—to jam ideas of legal objectivity.⁷ Law is a story, they insisted, it always has been, even if its power allows its status as story to masquerade as facts. The only way to reveal the status of the dominant legal narrative as story, the field seems to suggest, is to respond with other stories, to flood the law with narrative. It is story, they insisted, that helps us understand the persistent and regular forms of violence that mark what would later be called anti-Blackness. This is the tradition Crenshaw is part of, and it is crucial to understand intersectionality as a narrative response to the fiction of antidiscrimination law—that it protects the most marginalized and vulnerable. Through mobilizing and aggregating the stories of multiple plaintiffs, Crenshaw shows that the very regime designed to protect Black women leaves them uniquely vulnerable to harm.

If critical race theory emphasized storytelling, it also emphasized how stories are taught, circulated, and learned. It was a movement (not just a theory) forged in the legal academy at a moment when students were newly vocal about the racial composition of their faculty. Legal scholar Derrick Bell—one of the intellectual founders of critical race theory—left Harvard Law School in 1980 for the University of Oregon (he returned to Harvard a few years later). In his absence, the school had no faculty to teach his Constitutional Law and Minority Issues class. The Black Law Students Association advocated for Dean James Vorenberg to recruit a tenured Black professor to teach the course. Vorenberg insisted that it was challenging to find Black scholars to teach the class, so he hired esteemed advocates Julius LeVonne Chambers and Jack Greenberg to offer the course. In a profile of Derrick Bell in *The New Yorker*, Crenshaw reflects on this moment: “We initially coalesced as students and young law professors around this course that the law school refused to teach.”⁸ The students organized their own version of the class in 1982, inviting guests to cover the doctrinal issues they felt they most needed to learn. This was critical race theory *in* and *as* action, as a pedagogical practice that insisted that *who* teaches matters.

That same group would hold a retreat in 1989, the same year that Crenshaw published one of her two foundational articles, and the year before Derrick Bell announced that he was taking unpaid leave from Harvard Law School to protest the school’s unwillingness to hire and tenure a Black woman scholar (Harvard Law School would eventually hire and tenure Lani Guinier). *The New Yorker* reports that “Bell, cajoled by younger feminist legal scholars, Crenshaw among them, came to recognize the unique burdens that went with being both Black and female.”⁹ Bell’s protest was not without risk—at a rally at Harvard Law School, he noted “To be candid, I cannot afford a year or more without my law-school salary. But I cannot continue to urge students to take risks for what they believe if I do not practice my own precepts.”¹⁰ Critical race theory was a movement that insisted that risks were required to reimagine law and legal training, and it insisted the what, who, and *how* of the field mattered—that it be scholars and not just legal practitioners, and that it include Black women’s positionality as well as Black men’s to do its work.

I.1.3 Intersectionality as Storytelling

Patricia J. Williams's *Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991) was published the same year as Crenshaw's "Mapping the Margins" article and takes on the questions that animated critical race theory and critical legal studies debates—particularly the utility of rights for multiply marginalized people—and fuses them with a deep theorization of the psychic life of whiteness and the felt experience of marginalization for Black people. Her point of departure is a commitment to what she calls "her shape and his hand," the histories of Black women's lives often unarchived and overshadowed by "his hand," or the workings of white supremacist violence.¹¹ But her book unfolds from a desire to think about how these two forces and histories come to shape her ordinary life, her experience of herself. What does it mean to be intimate with histories of dispossession and violence, with histories of being owned, being an "object of property" as Williams notes in her famous essay? What if we think that familiarity as moving through our own flesh? If Williams shares with Crenshaw an investment in thinking juridically, she adds to it a sustained attention to affect, considering the self-deflating felt experiences of what she terms "spirit murder," and probing what it might mean for law to think seriously about how exclusion and dispossession *feel*.

This is a distinct vision of law, one that, much like Crenshaw's work, is animated by a desire to think about the experiences of the multiply marginalized. But Williams takes us somewhere different, asking how law might aid in the project of owning the self in the disowned world and how law might be a tool of self-possession. If Crenshaw wants to think about how the very architecture of antidiscrimination law is designed to ignore the experiences of the multiply marginalized, and how these legal regimes seemingly designed to protect Black women leave Black women still vulnerable to harm, Williams moves us in a different direction, asking us about how violence feels and how law might be oriented toward a "jurisprudence of generosity."¹²

The volume then moves between the acutely felt specificity of Williams's personal and familial experiences of racism, misogyny, and psychic and institutional disenfranchisement and a call for critical legal studies itself to gain a new perspective on the story it tells about—its critique of—rights as a poisoned well. In a chapter entitled "The Pain of Word Bondage," Williams argues that the "protective distance" that rights, as stories, provide is one of narrative perspective, of navigating the impasse of simultaneous and yet radically divergent experiences and interpretations of the same event. She transforms the story of particular words and their legal-cultural valence to claim an intersectional perspective as one of not knowing the other:

So that privacy is turned from exclusion based on self-regard into regard for another's fragile, mysterious autonomy; and so that property regains its ancient connotation of being a reflection of the universal self. The task is to expand private property rights into a conception of civil rights, into the right to expect civility from others. In discarding rights altogether, one discards a symbol too deeply enmeshed in the psyche of the oppressed to lose without trauma and much resistance. Instead, society must give them away. Unlock them from reification by giving them to slaves. Give them to trees. Give them to cows. Give them to history. Give them to rivers and rocks. Give to all of society's objects and untouchables the rights of privacy, integrity, and self-assertion; give them distance and respect. Flood them with the animating spirit that rights mythology fires in this country's most oppressed psyches, and wash away the shrouds of inanimate-object status, so that we may say not that we own gold but that a luminous golden spirit owns us.¹³

Shaping and critiquing early articulations of intersectionality through absoluteness and purity, Williams issues a call to understand storytelling and to multiply it rather than to issue a singular story or method of one's own or to assume a singular conclusion. It is a parable of authorship and of interpretation that takes feelings and desires seriously, from a Black feminist perspective, without disciplining them into a single historical or relational line. Williams reorients intersectionality through something as acutely specific and personal as her great-grandmother's bill of sale, insisting on the power of perceiving the legal and the political as stories we shape, rather than only histories that shape us.

I.2 Orientations

This volume, like the three stories above, aspires to reorient intersectionality by mapping and altering different routes through intersectionality—spatial, geographical, disciplinary, and methodological. We ask: what happens when we encounter intersectionality in a way that pushes on given knowledges in our fields? What happens when we take intersectionality to different places, including the university, but not exclusive to it? This companion volume offers no singular orientation but instead a presentation of multiple orientations to this key concept, including orientations that might sit in conflict or disagreement. We do this with an eye to thinking about what gets opened up about intersectionality when we think in the plural about multiple genealogies and orientations toward a crucial idea of multiple and interlocking structures of domination.

As we narrate these three stories about intersectionality and the volume's contributors offer other stories that reorient and unsettle origin stories of the term and analytic as we go, we hope to frame what is unique and valuable about the body of knowledge produced in the volume under the name of "companion" to such a burgeoning field. We organized this book in ways to guide its intellectual and classroom use as a companion to both the canon of intersectionality and its major interlocutors (some of whom have graciously written for this volume itself) including Vivian May, Ivy Ken, Anna Carastathis, and Patrick Grzanka's edited collection (*Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader*) that is a companion to this one. We see this companion as a contribution to intersectionality's reach across disciplines and outside the US academy in conversation with this above body of work—but also emphasizing new horizons and complications to the analytic, particularly around transnational, Indigenous, migrant, digital, legal, transgender, and embodied cultural afterlives of the term. Above all, each part and the whole volume stages reorientations to intersectionality that serve as crucial companions to the field as it stands at present. Robust, provocative, wide-ranging, multi-disciplinary, and globally located, these chapters are deeply invested in intersectionality even as they raise questions about its use, its travel, and its limits.

The first part, "Retracing intersectional genealogies," contains chapters that explore compelling alternative origins stories of intersectionality, historically and conceptually. Now that there is a significant body of work on a canon of intersectionality, how might we revisit those narratives and recast what they might occlude? These chapters expand the stories we tell about intersectionality—its history and its conceptual reach. They explore companionate articulations of intersectionality's history and definitions, from Crenshaw's own metaphorical abundance in describing her central concept to early creative articulations of the complicated enunciation of layered identity experience.

The second part, "Intersectional methods and (inter)disciplinarity," hones in on some specific disciplinary and methodological deployments of intersectionality, from psychology to Indigenous studies to labor studies to anthropology. While by no means exhaustive of either the volume's disciplinary reach or the field's, these chapters give particular weight to the ways

in which intersectionality can and does travel in distinct academic fields and intellectual homes. Their specificity also transcends the interest of the particular discipline encountered as each takes up how intersectionality as a method and a rubric travels—a key intervention along several axes in this collection.

In fact, intersectionality's global reach is one of the largest interventions in the volume. "Intersectionality's travels" and "Intersectional borderwork," the next two parts, both theorize intersectionality as a traveling concept and then deploy it as a transnational feminist method in specific global cases. The chapters herein complicate the limits of intersectionality and also how it "translates" to different national and regional contexts, as well as pedagogic realms on the borders of national law or disciplinary doctrine. Both in the classroom and in the investigation of border work, this volume presses on intersectionality as a live and vibrant theory of interaction and contact—and offers complex geographies of working through its possibilities and limits at the boundaries of disciplines, nations, and subjectivities.

The next three parts reflect on intersectionality's emergent work in embodiment and subjectivity through transgender studies and history, disability studies, and feminist science and data studies. Rooting themselves in wildly different methods, periods, and disciplinary practices, "Trans* intersectionalities" and "Disability and intersectional embodiment" contain chapters that reflect on the ways that intersectionality has become a companion to thinking through the body's most complicated routes of identification. At each articulation, intersectionality must rethink its assumptions about the metaphoric invocation of the body as a known set of identities. Transgender studies has challenged feminist and queer studies on its recognizable objects of inquiry and conceptualizations of gender alongside and with intersectional approaches, and this volume specifically addresses its emergent challenges and possibilities in the field as a different conceptualization of identity over time. Similarly, disability studies offers a vision of a body that can and does change over time—how does or can intersectionality account for subjectivity and structures over historical and biological time: the moment of the intersection constantly changing and reorienting? In "Intersectional science and data studies," the chapters ask how intersectionality might affect methods, practices, and interpretations of the body and research questions themselves across the sciences and social science.

After visiting these various emergent borders of intersectional thought and inquiry, we return to some of the analytic's most traveled disciplinary foci—popular culture and the law. In "Popular culture at the intersections" and "Rethinking intersectional justice," this collection concludes with difficult renegotiations of labor, political organizing, sexual assault and gun laws, economic policy, and violence against women of color. Refusing versions of intersectionality that are zero-sum games of interpretation or political strategy, the work in these parts models the impasses of intersectionality, in various cases that include the commodification of intersectionality itself, in doing work in the public sphere in this moment of intersectionality's seeming ascendancy in representational lexicons. From *Killing Eve* to Taylor Swift's copyright history, engaging in public and legal spheres of influence with intersectionality in mind leads, beyond specific time-bound cases, to new understandings of the possibilities and pitfalls of representation and regulation.

Cumulatively, and returning to June Jordan's speculative conversations with Olive, the hotel worker, the chapters in this collection ask what it means to engage new objects and orientations of intersectionality's history and use toward a future of the field. How can critique be a companion to this crucial term and analytic, in loving relation to its continued centrality in feminist and academic thinking? Questions of borders, impasses, and embodiment thread through the volume into its projected futures in feminist classrooms as we think about possible trajectories after and including intersectionality's rise.

I.3 Companionship and intersectional practice

What does it mean to be a companion? How can we treat sitting in and with difference, being in relation to each other, as a praxis that undergirds intersectionality theory and that underpins our method of assembling this volume? Intersectionality is the object of the volume's study and also (increasingly) the central object of the feminist classroom. The existence of this robust volume shows its reach and its travel. Many chapters herein talk about teaching as a site of intersectional labor: we narrate intersectionality for our students, we discuss the term's histories and genealogies, its political promise and possibilities, and its conflicts. The three stories we trace above, too, engage the classroom and the pedagogic directly as a site of contact, coalition, and impasse. Those are features of the process, though, not bugs, as this volume imagines coming to intersectional theory and practice through conflict, through difference, and through the classroom.

The classroom, and this volume as a companion, assume intimacy with the field, but also distinction and difference: we are in an ongoing conversation, acting as a traveling companion, a different collection of perspectives for how to use intersectionality alongside other methodologies of feminist studies that don't come to new resolutions, but see in intersectionality's diffusion a way to be in conversation across different classrooms, institutions, methods, and ways of thinking about—and writing about—difference. As Patricia J. Williams narrates in the same chapter of *Alchemy* referenced above, after an argument with her sister about the color of the road during a family trip:

The lesson I learned from listening to her wild perceptions is that it really is possible to see things—even the most concrete things simultaneously yet differently; and that seeing simultaneously yet differently is more easily done by two people than one, but that one person can get the hang of it with time and effort.¹⁴

This volume never pretends that conflicts in intersectionality are avoidable or resolvable, only that they are part of the difficult process of feminist and antiracist inquiry. The classroom is a catalyst, a testing point, a place for revision, a place for action, a place for negotiation, a place for failure, and a place for hope for intersectional politics. It is a frequent scenario replayed in intersectional writing to introduce the drama of intersectional teaching itself as a method. It is a place to learn how to see multiple perspectives at once. It is a training ground, perhaps the paradigmatic training site and symbol for intersectionality's practice and promise.

It is these moments of electricity, narrated on the page as an intersectional genealogy and across international feminist classrooms, that are our compass as we dive into this companion. Throughout these chapters, we collectively chart what it means to accompany intersectionality in its many official, canonical, and historical iterations, as well as humbly present the work of these 53 chapters from around the world and many disciplines as a way to breathe new, urgent, and unexpected life into this key term's continued travels.

Notes

- 1 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew," in *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech and the First Amendment*, ed. Mari Matsuda, Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw (New York: Routledge, 1993), 132.
- 2 See, for example, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (New York: Haymarket Press, 2017).
- 3 See Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Vivian M. May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

- 4 June Jordan, "Report from the Bahamas," in *Some of Us Did Not Die* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 213.
- 5 Jordan, 214.
- 6 Jordan, 213.
- 7 See Mari Matsuda, "Looking to the Bottom: Critical Legal Studies and Reparations," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 22 (1987): 323–99.
- 8 Crenshaw qtd. in Jelani Cobb, "The Man Behind Critical Race Theory," *New Yorker Magazine*, September 13, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/09/20/the-man-behind-critical-race-theory>
- 9 Cobb, online.
- 10 Bell qtd. in Cobb.
- 11 Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 6.
- 12 Williams, 8.
- 13 Williams, 164.
- 14 Williams, 149.

PART I

Retracing intersectional genealogies



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1

AN ETHICS OF UNCARE

Coalition politics after the turn of the century

Rebecca Wanzo

You will think we are condescending and judgmental, and we will think you are naive, impetuous and judgmental, and we'll both be right!

—*P. Catlin Fullwood, INCITE! Color of Violence II: Building a Movement, Chicago, IL, 2002*

This is a chapter about what can allow some of us to hurt less. I am not one for self-help books, but there is no question that some of us see Black feminist theory as having helped us survive. Some works are essential for not only understanding the field but the world. And in our most utopian imaginings, some texts are also instructive for living. Keeanga-Yamahtta-Taylor's *How We Get Free—Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* makes exactly this case. She reminds people that the work of the Combahee River Collective remains a Black feminist “guide to political action and liberation.”¹ The Combahee River Collective Statement is required reading for many introductory classes in gender and sexuality studies and should be understood as not only an artifact like Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* in feminist writing. It still holds vital relevance in the present.

We frequently see evidence of the Black feminist canon's continued relevance. When bell hooks died in 2021, the word “essential” was used repeatedly to describe her work. Even if faculty do not teach Kimberlé Crenshaw's “Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex” (1989) or “Mapping the Margins” (1991), students learn about intersectionality, a concept that had many precursors and has had wide-ranging influence.² It is considered “dangerous” by the people trying to ban discussions of structural racism from schools and US culture.³ One of the most cited Black feminist texts is Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), which remains a touchstone for thinking about the positionality of Black women even as standpoint theory has been critiqued for positing essentialist constructions of experience.⁴ Some Black feminist theory, like the Combahee River Statement, is embraced for what it says not only specifically about Black women, but about social justice for all. This delicate balance is also at play in Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984). As Amber Jamilla Musser argues, many scholars see Lorde's work as embracing “as many people as possible,” which “speaks to an optimism about coalitional politics and community that honors Lorde's legacy in an important way.”⁵ And yet Musser makes the case that it is important to recognize the specificity of Lorde's interest in resistance practices for “Black queer women.” The relationship between specificity and inclusion

for political projects is at the heart of coalition building, and all these texts are frequently cited in the discussion of the challenges and possibilities of coalition in the present.

Since the challenges and disappointments in coalition are so central to discussions of Black feminism today (particularly in relationship to white feminist allies), I have been struck by the notable absence of an essay that does not seem to have been as central to 21st-century teaching about Black feminism, or as frequently evoked outside the academy. Bernice Johnson Reagon's "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century" was anthologized in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), just like the Combahee River Collective Statement. Best known as the founder of African American a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock, Reagon is frequently cited in scholarship about feminist coalition, but her words and concepts are not consistently engaged with in other feminist work, do not turn up with frequency in popular feminist social media or publications, and are not evoked as often as those of Lorde, hooks, Collins, or Crenshaw.

Her essay's relative invisibility in contemporary Black feminist discourse prompts this piece, which is a meditation and provocation on why "Coalition Politics" has not been as essential to conversations about Black feminism today. I want to make a case for why it should be. Reagon is calling for an affective reorientation to coalition work that asks us to think about what is possible if we do not expect nurturing or care or to be truly seen in spaces of coalition. Her work may provide a model for radical self-care by seeing the danger of coalition work as both inherent and necessary, thus requiring that we cordon it off as a place where you do work before you venture home. And it is a reminder that no part of our identity—including Black womanhood—ensures that people who share it will care about the same things you do. Liberation not only requires that we participate in work that can lead to freedom but also that we liberate ourselves from the attachments that may be obstructive to that goal.

I believe that "Coalition Politics" challenges the affective politics of the present—that the discourse about solidarity, coalition, and political change has been focused on not only ever-expanding issue-oriented solidarity but affective solidarities. In other words, it is hard to imagine instrumental organizing in which we are clear that people will not feel or understand our positionality as something that can have any utility. It is certainly important and empowering to encounter the like-minded bond in activism and work that often develops into lasting political associations, long friendships, and even chosen families. Resisting some progressive pushes toward coalitions has been considered politically efficacious as well as an act of self-care. Reagon, however, offers what I see as a radical ethics of uncare in relation to coalitions, distinguishing between the necessary nurturing spaces that sustain us and the conflicted, challenging spaces of coalitional work.

1.1 Even the hateful can be helpful

Some of our political attachments are about the pleasure we find in progressive spaces and among people who share some part of our identities. Few places exemplify the expectation of pleasure as political more than women's music festivals. Eileen M. Hayes recounts that Sweet Honey in the Rock was the first Black women's music group to make an impact on the women's music scene.⁶ Bernice Reagon Johnson explains that some feminists had issues with the group for seeming insufficiently "women identified" because the group was "'people identified' (including men)" and that while they "came up short" the predominately white feminist music scene "took [the group] in anyway."⁷ Johnson began her activist work through the civil rights movement and began to address gender issues after the Joan Little case in 1974, in which an African American woman killed a white prison guard with a history of sexually assaulting women prisoners in self-defense. In 1982, Sweet Honey in the Rock founded Sisterfire, an

urban music festival that also allowed men to attend. But they lost support from the women's music scene because they had to "negotiate and conform with a more narrow political agenda in terms of gender by white lesbian activists."⁸ Johnson's remarks should thus be situated in a trajectory of challenges she faced with white feminists who did not recognize the interconnectivity of political struggles. Even if the term "intersectionality" would not be coined until the end of the decade, many women of color were bringing an intersectional lens to their presence in predominately white feminist spaces.

Reagon's essay was a reworked version of remarks she gave at the West Coast Women's Music Festival in 1981, and it was a space where the nexus of identity, politics, and pleasure was fully visible. Barbara Gagliardi gave an account in the feminist newspaper *Big Mama Rag* of the organizers positioning a "play area" in front of the stage focused on the struggles of Latin American women, resulting in speakers not being heard over the sounds of their play.⁹ Organizers apparently also had many white women speak on some of these issues because they felt that white women would be more likely to listen to other white women. Many more white women apparently paid attention when the Latina musicians began to play, more interested in dancing than in discussions of their political struggles. Women of color, Jewish women, and white women who wanted to address the racism and classicism at the festival met and wrote statements to present there and felt, Gagliardi writes, "a sense of joy and connectedness." But their work was met with the accusation that they were ruining a "good time," and the organizer accused them of trying to destroy the festival. They were being "feminist killjoys" to other feminists.¹⁰

Another attendee wrote a letter to the editor in response to this account, saying that the protest was at an "inappropriate time":

It didn't solve anything. An address was given toward helping next year's festival. More will be solved this way. I hope the committee is not made of women like Barbara. Little will be accomplished ... It seems impossible for some women to have a good time ... Big Mama Rag I am having a problem with anyway because of the tendency toward trashing. If there is so much wrong with other women, why be a Feminist.¹¹

The tension here is illustrative of so many of the conflicts from "second-wave" feminism to the present, in which some group of women configured as other is seen as disruptive to the pleasure of women's spaces. While pleasure was certainly a concern of earlier feminists, from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* to feminist decoupling of sex from reproduction, collective women's spaces gained increasing importance from the 1970s to the present. Sensate pleasures play a large role in the political, and recognizing the rise in discussing the pleasure of political spaces helps frame Reagon's invited keynote.

She begins her essay by noting her discomfort. While she does not specify what she means when she says, "I belong to the group of people who are having a very difficult time being here," we intuit that her Blackness may shape her unease in that space.¹² Reagon's piece offers a position that is both in keeping with contemporary frameworks around inclusion and diversity and counter to them. She argues that "we've pretty much come to the end of a time when you can have a space that's 'yours only'—just for the people you want to be there."¹³ On the one hand, progressive activists insist that people acknowledge the diverse world we live in and push against homogeneous spaces. On the other hand, they acknowledge the value of affinity groups having the opportunity to gather.

It is not that Reagon does not recognize the value of such spaces. She even frames part of the value as nationalist, alluding to the importance of Black nationalism in projects of political survival and self-definition. However, she pushes against the idea of "people who are like you,"

given the identity factors that make the idea of such affinity gatherings increasingly small. While the tenor of the remarks is clearly directed predominately toward the racial politics of white feminist organizing, her argument has implications for everyone. She acknowledges the importance of smaller groups for survival. That is a nurturing space, but she argues that ultimately, people have to leave the room to survive because smaller groups do not have the numbers to accomplish their goals.

Reagon argues that there is a need for people who are under threat by the larger society to be in a barred room for a little while and shore up “your energies so that you and your kind can survive.” But in setting up being nurtured, feeling safe, gathering energy, and being at home as incompatible with learning how to live in a diverse world, she articulates an affective politics counter to many claims about what we need to do to achieve justice in the present:

Coalition work is not done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn't look for comfort. Some people will come to coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They're not looking for a coalition; they're looking for a home! They're looking for a bottle with some milk in it and a nipple, which does not happen in coalition. You don't get a lot of food in coalition. You don't get fed a lot in coalition. In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You can't stay there all the time. You go to coalition for a few hours and then you go back and take your bottle wherever it is, and then you go back and coalesce some more.¹⁴

Reagon argues that you may need to “team up with someone who could possibly kill you,” and the radical suggestion here is that people might not act right, be untrustworthy, and be hateful, but they might still help us get work done. The contemporary moment seems a split between deep pessimism and optimism. On the one hand, an Afropessimistic framework insists on the intractability of global white supremacy and invites Black people to imagine something other than hoping for a change to its omnipresence. Reproductive justice and other rights related to gender and sexuality are constantly under threat and eroded around the world. Economic inequality only deepens. In response, some people argue that we need to stop trying to convince people to change what may be fundamentally enraging or even dangerous. Others have an optimistic framing that imagines that diversity training and other measures might force people to see and behave differently. Reagon's response is somewhat in between. She is not focused on the people who are not interested in coming to a room and trying to make things work. But she asks people to let go of the expectation that people in the room will all be “people like you,” in all the ways that we might understand “you.”

This is a model for liberating our affect, for letting go of attachments in which we can only get work done if people fully understand the inequality we experience. It means letting go of the idea that only like-minded people will help us get something done, and embracing the idea that even the hateful can be helpful. While she is largely directing this talk to white feminists, it speaks to anyone who has felt the high of the collective political space in which like minds are found, and the despair when the experience is disrupted by disappointing allies. It could be the feminist who is hostile to trans folks, the progressive Black man who does not stand up to address sexual violence, or the progressive who focuses on domestic issues and cares little about US imperialism's violence overseas. It has particular implications for those of us who are othered in a space and keep thinking that people must feel right to do right, when the conditions can be shaped where they will do the right thing for some issues and fail on others. We often

work with people who are guided by self-interest and little interest in us, or who may have other affects guiding them—like guilt, fear, and misguided affinities that flatten out differences between themselves and those with whom they work.

I once attended a breakfast with a Black woman leader who recounted a story of how she discovered that a mentor had discriminated against her by financially favoring a white man less qualified than her at work. She confronted him and said she would not ever forget or forgive this act, but then also recounted how he continued to be an advocate and sponsor for her and supported her in getting a very high-profile position elsewhere, by all appearances legitimately thrilled by her success. This story challenged many of us, and I talked about it with a few others who were there for some time afterward. It was counter to how many of us thought the aftermath of such a discriminatory action should go. He was not punished, she did not cut him off, and he ultimately facilitated her success. But this was not a Hollywood film of racial reconciliation that focuses on her forgiving him or about his possible transformation—it was about his eventual right actions and her ability to garner resources despite his failures.

What if we entered various spaces—institutions, jobs, activist spaces—with the expectation of threat and failed allyship? What if we did this while carefully cultivating “home” spaces where we receive the care and nurturing we deserve and do not look to these other spaces for support? These questions are essential to addressing how to deal with persistent challenges in coalition with various groups that last for decades (or even centuries).

1.2 White feminism and the changing same

Reagon’s “Coalition Politics at the Turn of the Century” naturalizes being skeptical of certain allyship, and thus is part of a genealogy of works that speak to the exclusionary practices of some white feminists. This has been an issue from the nineteenth century to the present, but it is not the same as in the nineteenth century, the early twentieth century, the 1970s, or even the 1990s. Pedagogically, I always emphasize to my students how much political work has been accomplished even as I make sure they recognize ongoing liberatory struggles. The intransigence of some issues can often result in my students saying that nothing has changed, a discourse I often hear more broadly that reflects a tendency to reduce things to binaries of good and bad, the same or changed. Thus people often frame “white feminism” as exactly the same over time. Brittany Cooper discusses how a Black woman student said she had issues claiming feminism because of how suffragists treated Ida B. Wells in the march of 1913.¹⁵ Margaret Sanger’s investment in eugenics is sometimes described as evidence that all white feminists can’t be trusted. Some critics of racism within feminism rhetorically conflate a set of issues and thus make having a conversation about the heterogeneity of feminism hard. “White feminism” as an object of critique should be understood as a set of ideas and practices that can be loosely grouped under liberal white feminism, and it often ignores or deemphasizes how gender inequality intersects with other issues. Sometimes white feminists who have practiced bad behavior in any given space or time are then made to represent all white feminists. And all white women and white feminists are often conflated, resulting in claims like “white feminism gave us Trump” in 2016.¹⁶

This claim is more than a little disingenuous. Despite his history of the treatment of women, Pew studies of validated voters report that Donald Trump won 47 percent of white women’s votes in the 2016 election (a smaller share than was initially reported by the exit polls).¹⁷ In 2020, Pew reports that 53 percent of white women did vote for Trump, but he also had 40 percent of Hispanic men, 37 percent of Hispanic women, 28 percent of Asians, and 12 percent of Black men. Black women were the most reliable block for democrats, with 98 percent voting for Clinton and 95 percent voting for Biden. In 2019, in a *National Geographic*/Ipsos poll, only

29 percent of women in the United States identified as feminist.¹⁸ Women in the Democratic Party are far more likely to identify as feminist than women in the Republican Party. In a very different poll in 2020 from Pew, 19 percent of women said feminism described them “very well” while another 41 percent said it described them somewhat well.¹⁹ These polls are not identifying race, so some of the people who were captured by these numbers are not white. But the math is likely clear—the vast majority of white women who identify as feminist did not vote for Trump. Moreover, a large number of other people who should have been opposed to his presidency because of his history of discriminatory behavior and policies voted for him. Then why did some people hold white *feminists*, in particular, responsible?

For Jennifer C. Nash and Samantha Pinto, this speaks to the ways that white feminists have functioned as the bad object of feminism in contemporary Black feminist discourse. They critique the conflation of white women and white feminism in a discussion about the role of rage in the history of Black feminist theory.²⁰ The expectation that white feminists should have been able to corral other white women ignores the other identity factors that would shape the votes of some white women. This conflation is illustrative of the kind of essentialist binary they see as problematic for contemporary Black feminist discourse, in which the “white woman has become the bad object we all rail against” while the Black woman is the good object that represents “the possibility of freedom for everyone by claiming universality and radical specificity all at once.”²¹

“Universality and radical specificity” is a good characterization of the ostensibly paradoxical way that Black women are configured in a variety of canonical pieces in the Black feminist canon. But universality may be less of a desired conceptualization in 21st-century texts. For example, if the turn toward the term BIPOC is about acknowledging how Black and Indigenous people experience oppression differently than those who identify as Asian and Latina/o/x, it performs its own erasures by being US-focused in the framing of identity.²² Acknowledging specificity can also drift into hierarchies of oppression, which some people are very comfortable with in the present. It is important to acknowledge that Black and Indigenous people have disproportionately worse outcomes in many contexts, but for some people that has meant that we need to disavow the idea of coalition. People of color was a term that grew out of radical social justice movements, a moment in which solidarity between people in the “Third World” was considered essential for revolution. While Reagon argues for the need for “nationalism”—which I take to reflect her commitment to Black nationalism for the survival of Black people—she cautions against the ways in which that can become reactionary.

Nash and Pinto have also looked to Reagon’s essay as one of a set of second-wave Black feminist essays that complicate contemporary discourse about the problem of coalition. They, too, recognize how “prescient” her work is for this moment, seeing Reagon as suggesting that being in coalitional spaces is like a “détente,” in which feminists “won’t feel better or differently.”²³ For Nash and Pinto, Brittany Cooper’s well-received *Eloquent Rage* is illustrative of how much of contemporary Black feminism has branched off from some earlier canonical work, as at times it seems to disavow coalition, and rage and anger produce a different outcome than they did for scholars like Reagon and Audre Lorde.

There is nonetheless a strong continuity between Cooper and Reagon, as they both address the affect resulting from the failures of intimacy in places where one might have expected to find it. While “rage” is Cooper’s “superpower,” she also produces a moving account of othering and disconnect from other Black people. From being accused of acting white in childhood, to normative constructions of Black femininity that played a role in how she was valued at Howard, to her commitment to calling out sexual violence perpetuated by Black men, Cooper also experienced alienation from within the community. This stands in contrast to the Black

women who hold her down and lift her up, the community of friends that are home and essential for her survival. Cooper believes that Black women often struggle with toxicity in their friendships with each other. This is related to patriarchy and white supremacy, as too much of our sense of self is shaped by external forces that make it hard to be with each other. Arguably, there is an overlapping issue with white women, as critics have often argued that attachments to white privilege can make intimacy hard between women of color and some white women. Cooper has not had a white girl friend since graduating high school, but that makes no difference to the question of coalition, for as Reagon reminds us, coalition spaces are not where our most sustaining and intimate connections will necessarily be found. However, interestingly enough, Cooper's text also makes a case for complicating the "you" of coalition, in the acknowledgment of how challenging intra-racial relations can be.

That conflicts between white feminists and Black women are a specific coalition problem but perhaps not a unique problem is also clear in Mikki Kendall's *Hood Feminism*, even if it ostensibly seems to state the opposite. Kendall started the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen to describe "mainstream feminist calls for solidarity centered on not only the concerns but the comfort of white middle-class white women at the expense of other women."²⁴ She writes that white feminists said her discourse was "divisive," "infighting," and airing "dirty laundry in public." Of course, this critique of disruptors is a familiar refrain, seen at the West Coast Women's Music Festival and in many other contexts where people believe good politics cannot take place without public loyalty.

The narrow construction of women and women's issues was particularly apparent around Hillary Clinton's primary run against Barack Obama, with the framing that Black women (or any women) were traitors if they voted for Obama and not for her. Kimberlé Crenshaw noted that there was a peculiar playing out of first-wave discourse during the election, which I witnessed myself from white feminists who literally stated they were outraged that a Black man would get something before a (white) woman.²⁵ All the Blacks were men and all the whites were women again, but most of us were brave enough to reject that discourse.

And yet many of Kendall's arguments about the problem with solidarity with white feminists can be true for many other feminists, women, or Leftists in general. One of her first examples is the treatment of trans women, which is not, by any measure, an issue exclusively with white feminists. Like Kendall, I have serious issues with the corporate feminism put forth by Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, which models a kind of performance that does not take intersectionality into account. But while Kendall critiques the role white women play in respectability politics, I think of how that is a regulation I also often experience from other Black women. As with the toxicity Cooper describes above, white supremacy plays a role in intra-racial regulation, but the harrowing respectability politics is nonetheless often a call that comes from inside the house. And just as it is unreasonable for a Black person who has committed a criminal act to be held up as an example of how all Black people behave, I won't be so cruel as to hold the infamously narcissistic *Girls* creator Lena Dunham up as representing all white feminism.

But Kendall makes arguments that are also in keeping with Reagon. She argues that

Solidarity is not for everyone—it cannot realistically include everyone—so perhaps the answer is to establish common goals and work in partnerships ... "#solidarityisforwhitewomen rose out of a particular problem within the online feminist community at that moment [but] it addresses the much larger problem of what I means to stand in solidarity as a movement meant to encompass all women when there is the distinct likelihood that some women are oppressing others."²⁶

Kendall is making a case for coalition and a distinction between solidarity and coalition. While it would be nice, as Brenda Lyshaug argues, for there to be “mutual recognition” and “enlarged sympathy” between feminists for political work to get done, what both Reagon and Kendall acknowledge is how very hard it can be if that is a pre-condition for all political work.²⁷ Setting aside the bad white feminist actors, there are some very well-intentioned white feminists who cannot and will not recognize me. In fact, sometimes the gesture toward kinship can flatten out differences between us and that can be more disruptive to doing work than sitting with irrec-
oncilability. We don’t have to get each other to get work done.

1.3 “We are not on the defensive”

Because white feminists are the most prominent feminists globally—the face of feminism—we have to speak to challenges that we often see emerge from discourse that is clearly shaped by white privilege. But one of my frustrations with discussions of US feminisms is that I still constantly hear people construct “mainstream feminism” in the United States as a history that is predominately the story of middle-class white women activists and that women of color have always been and continue to be on the outside. Countless scholars have talked about Indigenous feminism (and its influence on early suffrage), the interconnection of anti-slavery and antiracist movements with feminism, the role of Black women in suffrage, how essential Black women have been to the development of sexual harassment law and consciousness-raising about sexual violence, the centrality of women of color to working for reproductive justice, as well as countless other important feminist issues. The Black feminist canon is, arguably, more mainstream than many other feminist works. And yet we will hear Black women repeat this binary of Black women vs. feminism, as if we are not central to feminism. We have been in the room. As Reagon says, “it is our world, and we are here to stay. And we are not on the defensive.”²⁸

It may feel like we are on the defensive because we constantly must defend ourselves from discrimination from all directions. To return to the problem of the changing same of activist work—Reagon’s framing is still very applicable to the present. As she ends the essay, discusses how the media frames the civil rights movement as not accomplishing anything. As images of Black Lives Matter appeared in some contexts to be mirror images of protests from decades before, some activists focused on its failures as opposed to successes. But Reagon reminds everyone that great work has been accomplished, and can continue to happen, but that “to take the next step we’ve got to do it with some folk we don’t care too much about.” Identity politics was often blamed for the Left’s failure to make political wins, but many of those arguments turned on the idea of coalition with conservatives who do not support many progressive goals. Reagon is speaking about the challenge of working with people who are at least willing to be in a room with people not like themselves, even if they gatekeep and insult us and erase our issues. These are people who may not privilege all the struggles—because very few people do—but “everybody who is in this space at this time belongs here.”²⁹ Everyone who chooses to try to do the work of coalition belongs, and despite inevitable shortcomings and failures, there is no path forward but to “coalesce.” There are separate spaces for separated work—everything can’t get done in the same place or with the same people.

However, Reagon’s most radical statement may be one of uncare. She tells the audience that “I don’t care what you went through or what somebody did to you.”³⁰ As feminists, an ethics of care have been essential to our work. We care about people’s stories. We recognize that experience is knowledge. Hearing other people’s personal narratives is often transformative. But an ethics of uncare recognizes how often a group of people with their wounds can leave us trying to do the work of therapy instead of other work that needs to be done. An ethics of uncare

might be a commitment to orienting our affect to not expecting care or recognition from people who may not ever understand us. An ethics of uncare may remind us that we need to cultivate love and care outside of work, outside of institutions, outside of coalitions because the solidarity détente may never end. We may feel better about coalitions and the people we interact with if we don't expect so much from them.

More importantly, we might get more done, so that we can feel better elsewhere.

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2

THE MEMPHIS SCHOOL

Ivy Ken and Allison Suppan Helmuth

2.1 The Memphis School

Intersectionality as a concept is often perceived to have its origins in the momentous work of Kimberlé Crenshaw in law and critical race theory and Patricia Hill Collins in sociology.¹ Hidden in that attribution are the contributions of a multiracial group of feminists in sociology who developed an early academic center for intersectional scholarship, using the term “intersection” to theorize race, class, and gender dynamics a decade before Crenshaw used its offshoot, “intersectionality.”

The aim of this chapter is to introduce readers to the intersectional approach of this earlier group of scholars, whom we call the Memphis School. Begun by two Black women—Bonnie Thornton Dill and Elizabeth Higginbotham—who met and shared their work with each other in the 1970s, the Memphis School came to include scholar-activists whose work centered the structural locations of Black women, Chicanas, Chinese-American women, working-class white women, and Japanese-American women in relation to education, families, jobs, citizenship, religion, and the economy. These sociologists applied for and obtained funding to study the intersections of race, class, and gender; they sought each other out, supported each other, and mentored the next generation of scholars, and they produced discipline- and field-shaping scholarship. Collectively, they cultivated and then staked a unique multiracial feminist approach to studying women of color, one that was both rooted in and critical of Marxist, internal colonial, and social scientific paradigms. They have gone on separately to found the Consortium on Race, Gender, and Ethnicity at the University of Maryland and the Center for Race and Gender at the University of California-Berkeley.

In this chapter, we briefly describe the institutional steps through which the Memphis School was established and then engage with four articles from early in their scholarly journeys. In doing so, we highlight the unique qualities and legacy of the Memphis School’s collaborative and field-building approach to intersectionality.

2.2 Memphis

In 1980, Bonnie Thornton Dill, an assistant professor of sociology and social work at Memphis State University, delivered a keynote address titled, “Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an

All-Inclusive Sisterhood,” for a feminist audience at Barnard College. A program officer for the Ford Foundation who was in the audience invited Dill to submit a proposal to the foundation, which she did in collaboration with Elizabeth Higginbotham, who was in a postdoctoral position at Columbia University. Their successful proposal established the Inter-University Research Group Exploring the Intersection of Race and Gender (or “The Intersection Group”) in 1980. This group was composed of five scholars from different universities who received summer stipends, books, and funds to gather together in Memphis: Dill, Higginbotham, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, and Ruth Enid Zambrana.

The Intersection Group, which was soon joined by Lynn Weber Canon and Maxine Baca Zinn, was parlayed into a significant, five-year grant to establish the Center for Research on Women at Memphis State in 1982.² The infrastructure of the Center—still in existence today—allowed them to sponsor meetings of the Intersection Group, host visiting scholars, establish a working paper series on the intersections of race, class, and gender, assemble and share a bibliography of all the scholarship they could find about women of color, distribute a newsletter, and organize one-day workshops and a summer institute.

The members of the Memphis School came together at a time when many other antiracist and antipatriarchy groups, such as the Combahee River Collective and Women of All Red Nations, had assembled with the similar goals of centering the experiences of women of color and imagining changes to the social order. Each of the Memphis School members had a significant history of both activist and scholarly work focused on the dynamics of race, class, and gender in the lives of what they then called “racial-ethnic women.” Those who attended the Memphis School’s workshops and institutes were able, in those spaces, to find other scholars who were sometimes the “only ones” at their own universities producing scholarship on Black, Chinese-American, Mexican-American, and Japanese-American women, and the meetings and connections forged by the Memphis School gave early-career scholars confidence to return to their departments as members of a larger network of sociologists who centered the study of women of color.³ Both the founding members and the scholars they hosted would fundamentally alter the trajectory of sociology and form the field that would come to be known widely as intersectionality.

2.3 Works

To provide a glimpse of the approaches, areas of focus, and influence of the Memphis School scholars, we focus on four articles published from 1982 to 1985. These are not the only or necessarily the most important articles from the Memphis School, but because they all explicitly articulate the concept of “intersections” in the early days of the school, we engage with them here. Bonnie Thornton Dill’s 1983 article in *Feminist Studies* grew from the 1980 talk mentioned earlier. In it, she analyzed how “the structures of race, gender, and class intersect in the lives of Black women.”⁴ In a review essay that appeared in *Signs* a year prior, Maxine Baca Zinn paraphrased Mario Barrera’s book, *Race and Class in the Southwest*,⁵ to analyze how “an intersection of the two kinds of class segments,” namely, race and sex, places Chicanas at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy.⁶ In 1985, Elizabeth Higginbotham published an article from her 1979 dissertation based on “the intersection of race and class” in Black women’s pathways to higher education.⁷ Also in 1985, Evelyn Nakano Glenn published “Racial Ethnic Women’s Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender and Class Oppression,” which brought together Marxist feminism and scholarship on internal colonialism to analyze the historical and contemporary paid and unpaid work of Black women, Mexican-American women, and Chinese-American women.⁸ We collaboratively conducted close readings of these articles and identified what conversations

and audiences the scholars engaged, along with their collective emphasis on the themes of (1) the order imposed by intersecting social structures, (2) the realms of relationality, and (3) the strategies of survival enacted by women of color. We conclude by underscoring the contributions the Memphis School made to a theory of “intersecting” rather than “parallel” sources of oppression.

2.4 Themes

2.4.1 *An intersectional order*

2.4.1.1 Social structures

Race, gender, and class were understood by the Memphis School to be social structures. Like the wind, social structures cannot be directly observed, but we can identify them in the enduring and often problematic groupings or “networks” of particular institutions, ideologies, practices, norms, and relations that impose order onto people’s lives.⁹ To say that race is a social structure, for example, is to say that race creates order out of things that would not otherwise have a relationship with each other. Race brings colonial arrogance and capitalist exploitation together to ascribe a hierarchy of values to specific characteristics of bodies, ways of life, religious rationales, identities, family forms, languages, and a million other things. When the Memphis School argued that race, gender, and class “intersect,” then, they spoke of the order these social structures together impose.

This is distinct from a focus on identity. The Memphis School was adamant about the importance of centering the lives of women of color, but they never wrote of—or seemed interested in theorizing—“intersectional identities.” Rather, they looked for structural arrangements evident in Black women’s lives, Chicanas’ lives, Chinese-American women’s lives, and working-class white women’s lives in order to explain their “social worlds and day-to-day struggles.”¹⁰ Zinn’s work is often quoted as a clear explanation of the sort of analysis made possible when emphasis is given not to “factors that characterize individuals,” but rather, “the organization of social institutions . . . including the concentration of power, the legal system, organizational barriers, and other factors external to individuals” that create and fortify hierarchical relationships.¹¹ With this emphasis, the Memphis School observed patterns in the ways race, gender, and class together impose order by constricting the forms of work women of color have been able to do, the educational experiences they have had, the families and communities they have been able to construct, and the strategies they have employed in their struggles to resist these conditions.

2.4.1.2 The work intersecting social structures do

The order that race, gender, and class impose is, of course, enormously unfair and oppressive, and it only “operates” as long as the separation of women of color—from each other, from white people, and from men of color, under different circumstances—is enforced through law, practice, space, and institutional arrangement. This speaks to the work that an intersectional order does, identified by the Memphis School primarily as *differentiating*, *excluding*, *shaping*, and *subordinating*. Dill’s piece—a brilliant upbraiding of white middle-class feminism—argued that the interaction of race, class, and gender requires Black women to struggle against a different set of “women’s issues” than white feminists identified. These include Black women’s survival, freedom, and the social transformation of what Angela Davis called the racism of “a wrongly ordered society.”¹² Dill argued that white women who ignore, dismiss, or actively work against these concerns cannot share a “sisterhood” with Black women: “The structures of race and class,” she wrote,

“generate important economic, ideological, and experiential cleavages among women” as they “shape and differentiate women’s lives.”¹³

Similar to Dill’s focus on structural differentiation, Zinn focused on exclusion. She considered the “structural arrangements of American society that have excluded Chicanos (both women and men) from full and equal participation in its public institutions.”¹⁴ Where Dill articulated the ways these structural arrangements shape “women’s lives,”¹⁵ Zinn focused on the shaping of Chicanas’ “social location,” a slightly different concept pointing to relative placement, such as the bottom of the capitalist labor market.¹⁶ Zinn disavowed cultural explanations for this placement, which held that Chicanas who had low-paid jobs and large families did so because they accepted the expectations imposed by the church and by “Mexican cultural antecedents” such as Aztec heritage.¹⁷ Instead, she focused on “how capitalism, patriarchy, and racism operate together to subordinate women of color” within a hierarchically arranged social order.¹⁸

2.4.2 Relations

The Memphis School established in these early articles what they later called the “relational” consequences of differentiation and exclusion, which play out in women of color’s relation to at least three different conceptual realms: (1) the capitalist, patriarchal, racist social order; (2) institutions; and (3) other structurally located groups.

2.4.2.1 Women of color in relation to the racist, capitalist, patriarchal social order

First, their work followed the Marxian logic that emphasizes workers’ relation to the means of production. Higginbotham defined “classes” as “structural positions within the social relations of production,” signifying “a shared relationship with the economic foundations of society.”¹⁹ Likewise, Zinn emphasized “the relationship of Chicana laborers to the capitalist system of production,”²⁰ and Dill highlighted how “Black people have been used in the process of capital accumulation.”²¹ Glenn’s work reflects the extensive Marxist feminist networks she was part of in the 1970s and 80s, in which she critiqued the gendered and racial limitations of Marxist labor theory and centered the relations of specific groups of women of color to the economic system.

It is important to emphasize that, unlike Marxists, the Memphis School placed gender and race at the same level of analysis as capitalism, namely, at the level of social structure. Women of color live in relation to the economic order, but the Memphis School argued that such relationships cannot be segmented away from race and gender to be represented simply as “class issues.”²² The Memphis School did not agree with white feminists about the overriding importance of patriarchy, nor did they accept racial capitalist models that used men’s experiences with racially restricted rights and freedoms as representative of all workers of color. Rather, they demonstrated that in Black, Mexican-American, and Chinese-American families from World War II onwards, the need for two incomes was a reality that involved (1) the capitalist social order, which required work and wages for survival; (2) the structural racism that pitted wages for workers of color against wages for white women and men; and (3) the “economic partnership between men and women” that shaped their gendered relationships within families.²³ These structural realities also required reproductive labor from women of color—both Higginbotham and Glenn describe it as “vigilance”—in protecting and socializing their children within the racist, capitalist, patriarchal social order.

2.4.2.2 Women of color in relation to institutions

Women of color’s relations to these intersecting social structures are enacted through specific “institutional arrangements”²⁴ and give rise to particular “institutional forms.”²⁵ The Memphis

School contended that it is through women of color's relationships to these institutions—including families, kinship networks, education systems, the law, ethnic communities, occupations, and the public and private spheres—that the “linkages between different forms of structural inequality” become apparent.²⁶

Higginbotham explicitly argued that intersections must be studied in the context of “specific institution(s),” such as higher education.²⁷ Her focus was on the historical moment when Black students gained access to predominantly white colleges and universities (PWIs). The Black women she interviewed all graduated from PWIs between 1968 and 1970, even though they were dissuaded by teachers from applying and they dealt with isolation and discrimination while there. Higginbotham traced some of the institutions these Black women interacted with and navigated on their pathways to PWIs, such as the racially segregated neighborhoods in which they lived and the slow implementation of federal housing law. She presented these as links in a chain of institutions that shape life chances. For example, institutionalized discrimination in the labor market, which whites used to provide themselves with higher compensation and greater opportunities, linked together with white families' financial and legal ability to move wherever they wanted with the assistance of government-sponsored loans, and with whites' political control over the use of local taxes. As a result, the working-class Black women in Higginbotham's study attended schools in the 1950s and 60s with inadequate resources, and many middle-class Black women attended private schools. Black families' relationship to this institutional chain, from law and labor markets to redlining and under-resourced schools, meant that those that sought to prepare their daughters for college needed to find the time, skills, and financial resources to make up for what was unavailable to them.

Zinn established that coping strategies like this are themselves an institutional form that arose in response to the structural differentiation, exclusion, and isolation of women of color. Just as the Black families in Higginbotham's work helped their daughters with their homework, monitored what they were learning, served on parent-teacher associations, provided encouragement, and countered racist teachers, Chicanas developed “kinship networks” to protect and provide support to each other.²⁸ These “close-knit kinship patterns” included parents, siblings, friends, and others who helped each other financially, emotionally, and with their time and reproductive labor. This recognizes the active nature of women of color's relationships with institutions. Navigating oppressive social structural arrangements is apparent not only in the institutions that are foisted on them, such as PWIs, but also in the institutions they create themselves, such as kinship networks.

2.4.2.3 Women of color in relation to other groups

In our reading, one of the most important aspects of the Memphis School's work is the identification of opportunities lost. The School, rooted in sociology, recognized that intersecting social structures produce institutional arrangements that shape people's relationships with each other, including the barriers that impede wider coalitions. Higginbotham in particular highlighted how housing discrimination “limits the nature of and degree of interaction between Black citizens and the wider society, isolates them, and stifles the development of alliances with other segments of the working population.”²⁹ This echoed W. E. B. Du Bois's lamentation over the success of white planters and industrialists at dividing workers who shared a common relationship with the means of production during the Reconstruction Era. It focused not merely on how people's identities are shaped, but how the development of humane social orders is forestalled through the imposition of “structural opposition between groups.”³⁰

This is also a recognition that social relations among people are not static, but produced (and blocked). Recognizing this ongoing production, Glenn specifically sought a framework that “traces changes in the relations” between differentiated groups “in relation to the development of capitalism.”³¹ This meant, in part, identifying who has had to do what in society, and who has benefitted from it. With this, Glenn provided a pointed explanation of how “the situation of white women has depended on the situation of women of color.”³² Glenn analyzed Black, Chicana, and Chinese-American women’s experiences as colonized workers in the US, noting that the institutions of family, paid labor, and reproductive labor have been arranged in ways that benefit white women in relation to women of color. As the wealth of white families grew during and after industrialization with capital’s demand for men’s paid labor, white women increasingly had the means to distance themselves from reproductive labor in their so-called private spheres by exploiting the (poorly) paid labor of white immigrant women and women of color. White affluent women’s private spheres served as public spheres for the women who engaged in this paid household labor, which freed white women to attain education, jobs, and political positions—privileges that depended on the confinement of women of color. This is more than “inequality.” It is, rather, white women’s exploitation of women of color under capitalism. “Race,” Glenn argued, “as organized within a colonial labor system, interacted with gender (patriarchy) and class (capitalism) to determine the structure of private and public spheres and women’s relationships to these spheres.”³³

The Memphis School’s theoretical and empirical focus on relationality, in our reading, is a complex, vital, and under-recognized contribution. Sociologist Erik Olin Wright built a career on the relational character of class;³⁴ Mustafa Emirbayer wrote a literal “manifesto for a relational sociology” based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, John Dewey, and Charles Tilly.³⁵ Their extremely popular and well-received work, published in top sociology journals and best-selling books, overwhelmingly cites white men and makes no mention of the Memphis School scholars’ work. An entire *Palgrave Handbook on Relational Sociology* completely ignores it.³⁶

The Memphis School specified that women of color are bound in relationships to the capitalist, patriarchal, racialized social order, to institutions, and to each other and other groups. In so doing, they identified how women of color’s lived experiences, life chances, social locations, and opportunities for collective consciousness have been shaped.

2.4.3 Strategies

In light of curtailed opportunities produced within intersecting social structures, the Memphis School understood the importance of shining a bright light on women of color’s strategies of resistance, adaptation, and recognition. As mentioned, Zinn laid out how large families and close kinship networks, for example, could be considered forms of adaptation to the broad social processes of exclusion that Chicanas endured. Rather than imagining presumed cultural norms as drivers of Chicanas’ family structures, Zinn presented family construction as a response and practice of resistance to the structural arrangements that excluded and marginalized these women.

Higginbotham, too, found core socialization strategies among the families of both working-class and middle-class Black women in her study. Despite class differences, the theme of being “socialized for survival” was common among the women she interviewed.³⁷ Recognizing society as racist, these women’s parents attentively taught their daughters to identify racist and discriminatory situations and to practice fending for themselves. The women learned they had to “be twice as good” and embrace excellence and independence in order to counteract racist assumptions. This socialization strategy especially mattered for the middle-class women whose

parents adopted the material strategy of moving them to private schools where they had to interact primarily with white teachers, students, and administrators.

Glenn's focus on strategies included a nod to Angela Davis's work, in which she argued that staying alive and raising their own children were forms of resistance for Black women under slavery.³⁸ Further, Glenn argued that while white feminists have pointed to their confinement in the home and their relationships with their husbands as sources of oppression, women of color have turned to their families as a source of refuge from racist, capitalist institutions outside the home. The work that mothers of color have done in their families, "socializing children into an alternative value system, and providing a base for self-identity and esteem," Glenn noted, "is experienced as a form of resistance to oppression rather than a form of exploitation by men."³⁹

Dill approached strategy from a more proscriptive vantage point. Because her project was to critique white feminism, she presented strategies that could be adopted to make feminism more inclusive. Primary among these is the straight-out "abandonment of the concept of sisterhood as a global construct based on unexamined assumptions about our similarities."⁴⁰ The structures of race, class, and gender have intersected to produce differences in women's experiences and relations to society's institutions, she argued, so a feminism that does not recognize and account for those differences is inadequate. Based on her analysis of white women's access to privilege at the expense of Black women's labor, she specifically highlighted the need to center Black women's household employment as a fundamental feminist issue.

By centering the experiences and strategies of women who worked, went to school, and had families under the influences of a variety of historical periods, racist institutions, gendered constraints, and moments of capitalism, the Memphis School identified what different groups of women of color were up against and how they managed to survive, succeed, and influence oppressive social structures over generations.

2.4.4 Distinctions

Aside from their vast agreement on the structural nature of gender, race, and class and the relational character of women of color's life chances and strategies, there may be a subtle point of divergence in the Memphis School's early conceptual approach to intersections. In our reading, we noted a distinction between descriptions of intersectional relationships as fluid and as more static. As mentioned, Glenn sought a theoretical approach that is dynamic, historical, and that "*traces changes* in the relations between dominant and subordinate groups in relation to the development of capitalism."⁴¹ Similarly, Dill wrote of wanting to understand "*the ways* in which the structures of race, gender, and class intersect in the lives of Black women."⁴² These both suggest historical movement and a focus on identifying and understanding the practices and mechanisms that create and reinforce inequality, rather than describing circumstances that result from being situated—in a stationary way—at the intersection of different race, gender, and class groups.

We suspect that a wider disciplinary preoccupation with "stratification" in sociology during this era influenced the Memphis School scholars to frame some of their ideas within that lexicon, such as by describing Chicanas as a "class segment," for instance, or seeking to identify a group's "place" in the occupational structure.⁴³ In these examples, an intersection is a static position—at least momentarily, for the purpose of analysis—where a group of people is situated. This may reflect what was, in the 1970s, an accelerated plunge into inferential statistics in sociology. The discipline was founded by positivists but practiced for decades in the 20th century by "radicals," "rebels," and those who "poke, probe, provoke, and puncture the social system in order to reveal its characteristics."⁴⁴ When computer-aided analyses of large survey data sets

became possible, lived experiences became “variables,” and the ability to bind, chart, and use these “measures” to represent social realities became a goal in itself, rewarded in the “flagship” journals and the awarding of jobs and grants.

Still, the Memphis School saw even hierarchies as “relational,” as in Zinn’s argument that an analysis of intersections needs to focus not on individuals but on the organization of the social institutions “that generate and maintain hierarchical relations” between people.⁴⁵ “Generating” and “maintaining” are an acknowledgment that these relations change over time and under particular structural conditions, even if they are momentarily charted as static “social locations” within a hierarchy. This at once underscores the effects of social structures and institutional arrangements and locates people and groups in positions in relation to them.

2.5 Contributions

The Memphis School strived to provide explanations—rather than descriptions—of Black, Chicana, and Chinese-American women’s lived experiences. They wanted to articulate *why* these experiences differed so significantly from white women’s, men of color’s, and white men’s lives under capitalism. Their work was both empirical and theoretical, in that they brought evidence to bear on this question and rejected other theoretical explanations in favor of those that center structural and institutional arrangements, those that do not fetishize “culture” as the reason for women of color’s structural locations, and those that do not treat race, class, and gender as “parallel” systems of inequality.

This rejection of the notion of race, class, and gender as parallel is particularly relevant to the recognition of the Memphis School as early and explicit theorizers of what we now call intersectionality. Glenn critiqued both Marxist feminism and colonial labor theory for failing to recognize the distinctive and fundamental aspects of women of color’s lived experiences. “The patriarchy model,” she said, referring to Marxist feminism, “ignores differences among women based on race. When race is discussed, it is treated as a parallel system of stratification.”⁴⁶ “Parallel,” here, meant either one or the other, either gender or race, without attention to the intersections. She then called for:

the development of theoretical and conceptual frameworks for analyzing the interaction of race and gender stratification. Separate models exist for analyzing race, ethnic or gender stratification. Although the “double” (race, gender) and “triple” (race, gender, class) oppression of racial ethnic women are widely acknowledged, no satisfactory theory has been developed to analyze what happens when these systems of oppression intersect.

This call was answered in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s important work on the absurd legal argument that a lack of evidence of discrimination against white women means there is obviously no discrimination by gender, and an absence of discrimination against Black men means there is no discrimination by race. Black women are lost in such convoluted logic, which led Crenshaw to offer the “traffic” metaphor of intersectionality.⁴⁷

Crenshaw’s article, “Mapping the Margins,” included a citation to what was then a new book called *Black Feminist Thought* by the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, who was mentored by the Memphis School.⁴⁸ Collins entered graduate school in 1980, by which time the Memphis School had already launched their Intersection Group and begun a working paper series on “The Intersection of Race, Class and Gender.” The Memphis School invited Collins to present her work and provided feedback on early drafts of her chapters. This is but one example of how

the Memphis School consciously created opportunities for scholars of color to gather, share work, and establish mentoring relationships.

Intersectionality has rightly been heralded as one of many contributions of Black feminists, not to be confused as synonymous with Black feminism.⁴⁹ The Memphis School's work underscores the importance of this distinction and also places intersectionality in the context of what was in the 1980s called "multiracial feminism." Scholars of Mexican-American, Japanese-American, African-American, and later, white and Chinese-American heritage contributed to the development of the concept in Memphis, in part by empirically identifying the unique structural characteristics of women in each group, and in part by emphasizing the relationship women of color held in common to the racist, patriarchal capitalist social order. Then as now, intersectional work has centered strategies for survival under an oppressive social order.

Notes

- 1 "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139–67; "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241–1300; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: HarperCollins Academic, 1991).
- 2 Lynn Weber, Elizabeth Higginbotham, and Bonnie Thornton Dill, "Sisterhood as Collaboration: Building the Center for Research on Women at the University of Memphis," in *Feminist Sociology: Life Histories of a Movement*, ed. Barbara Laslett and Barrie Thorne (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 229–56.
- 3 The Memphis School conducted surveys of workshop and institute attendees, and this was one of the common comments.
- 4 "Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood," *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 1 (1983): 131, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177687>.
- 5 *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979).
- 6 "Mexican-American Women in the Social Sciences," *Signs* 8, no. 2 (1982): 266–67.
- 7 "Race and Class Barriers to Black Women's College Attendance," *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 90.
- 8 Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Racial Ethnic Women's Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender and Class Oppression," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 17, no. 3 (1985): 86–108.
- 9 Zinn, "Mexican-American Women in the Social Sciences," 264.
- 10 Glenn, "Racial Ethnic Women's Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender and Class Oppression," 86.
- 11 Zinn, "Mexican-American Women in the Social Sciences," 271–72.
- 12 "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (1971): 2–15.
- 13 "Race, Class, and Gender," 137–38.
- 14 Zinn, "Mexican-American Women in the Social Sciences," 264.
- 15 "Race, Class, and Gender," 137.
- 16 "Mexican-American Women in the Social Sciences," 263.
- 17 Zinn, 263.
- 18 Zinn, 268.
- 19 "Race and Class Barriers to Black Women's College Attendance," 90.
- 20 "Mexican-American Women in the Social Sciences," 267.
- 21 "Race, Class, and Gender," 138.
- 22 Dill, 148.
- 23 Glenn, "Racial Ethnic Women's Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender and Class Oppression," 101.
- 24 Glenn, 88.
- 25 Zinn, "Mexican-American Women in the Social Sciences," 264.
- 26 Dill, "Race, Class, and Gender," 148.
- 27 "Race and Class Barriers to Black Women's College Attendance," 90.
- 28 Zinn, "Mexican-American Women in the Social Sciences," 264.

- 29 “Race and Class Barriers to Black Women’s College Attendance,” 91.
- 30 Diane K. Lewis, “A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism, and Sexism,” *Signs* 3, no. 2 (Winter 1977): 432, quoted in Zinn 1982.
- 31 “Racial Ethnic Women’s Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender and Class Oppression,” 87.
- 32 Glenn, 105.
- 33 Glenn, 103.
- 34 *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985); *Understanding Class* (London; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2015).
- 35 “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (1997): 281–317.
- 36 François Dépelteau, *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Springer Science+Business Media, 2018).
- 37 Higginbotham, “Race and Class Barriers to Black Women’s College Attendance,” 93.
- 38 Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves.”
- 39 Glenn, “Racial Ethnic Women’s Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender and Class Oppression,” 103.
- 40 Dill, “Race, Class, and Gender,” 146.
- 41 “Racial Ethnic Women’s Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender and Class Oppression,” 87, emphasis ours.
- 42 “Race, Class, and Gender,” 131, emphasis ours.
- 43 Zinn, “Mexican–American Women in the Social Sciences.”
- 44 T.R. Young, “The Politics of Sociology: Gouldner, Goffman, and Garfinkel,” *The American Sociologist* 6 (1971): 276–81 quoted in Bernard; Jessie Bernard, “My Four Revolutions: An Autobiographical History of the ASA,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 4 (1973): 778.
- 45 “Mexican–American Women in the Social Sciences,” 272.
- 46 Glenn, “Racial Ethnic Women’s Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender and Class Oppression,” 87.
- 47 “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.”
- 48 “Mapping the Margins”; Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.
- 49 Jennifer C. Nash, “‘Home Truths’ on Intersectionality,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 23, no. 2 (2011): 445–70.

3

NOT YOUR AVERAGE COUNTER-ORIGIN STORY

Intersectionality, Ida B. Wells, and *Southern Horrors*

Regis Fox

In Episode 21 of the African American Policy Forum's (AAPF) *Under the Blacklight* series, host Kimberlé Crenshaw engages a panel of activists—the mothers and sisters of Tanisha Anderson, Sandra Bland, Michelle Cusseaux, Shelly Frey, Korryn Gaines, India Kager, and Kayla Moore, individuals slain by police or other agents of the state between 2012 and the present. Before panelists begin their testimonies, Crenshaw contends that “stories are the lifeblood of social movements” (2020). Those stories, as Crenshaw affirmed long ago, are often stories of intersectional identity. Though scholarly and popular opinion often fixes Crenshaw as the sole progenitor of intersectional thought, her aforementioned work with AAPF (and elsewhere) reinforces multiplicity of voice and perspective as a precondition for social transformation. Convening critical public conversations about racial violence, Crenshaw compels us to #SayHerName, and to do so intersectionally, or with resolute attentiveness to divergent effects of sexuality, class, disability, and gender. Importantly, Crenshaw privileges “intellectual genealogies” over “origin stories,” interrogating the complexity and layeredness of the past in order to eradicate enduring inequality in the present (Nash, 2019).

In *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*, Jennifer Nash clarifies that

Origin stories work by presuming that intersectionality emerged not through debate or collaboration but through a *singular* voice, historical moment, or foundational text. In this way, origin stories are distinct from intellectual genealogies that trace how concepts merge from multiple traditions or that analyze how different theoretical traditions treat the same concept differently.

(2019, 39; *emphasis in original*)

In the pages to follow, I argue that the urgency of our political moment necessitates an intellectual genealogy of intersectionality expansive enough to incorporate the life and writing of Ida B. Wells (1862–1931),¹ specifically, her anti-lynching work titled *Southern Horrors*. A pamphlet funded, published, and distributed by Black women in 1892, *Southern Horrors* extends analyses of state violence as political, economic, racialized, gendered, ritualized, and sexualized, insights

especially pertinent in the 21st century. Wells's strategies for reimagining the dominant order, I aim to demonstrate, are thoroughly intersectional in conception and approach. This establishes kinship between Wells and contemporary Black thought leaders from Errin Haines to Nikole Hannah-Jones, from Brittney Cooper to Brittany Packnett Cunningham, opening up broader pathways to political liberation today.

Not afforded the privilege of a haphazard or incidental political awakening, Wells—like the 21st-century voices featured with Crenshaw in the *Under the Blacklight* series—was interpellated as an advocate for social justice through violation. The genesis of *Southern Horrors*, in particular, stems from her experiences following the March 1892 lynching of her friends, Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart, Black entrepreneurs in Memphis, Tennessee. The productivity and competitive edge of Moss's, McDowell's, and Stewart's People's Grocery Company over a neighboring white grocery business, an entity accustomed to a monopoly, cost them their lives. In the wake of the unjust murders, Wells penned a "provocative" article in the newspaper, the *Free Speech*, of which she served as co-owner. The article questioned the morality of white Southern women in whose defense the March lynching had purportedly been committed, and Wells (out of town at the time of the printing), was threatened by the town's leading white citizens with death if she dared ever to return to Memphis (*Southern Horrors*, 14). Still, in community with other Black women activists, Wells mobilized *Southern Horrors* to undermine cultural mythologies of frontier justice and the "cult of true womanhood"; illuminated profit motive for state-sanctioned violence; and demanded accurate media representation of anti-Black terror. Additionally, *Southern Horrors*—the first in Wells's anti-lynching oeuvre to center Black women and girls while discussing a crime almost exclusively associated with men—exceeds narrow gender specifications (Bay 2009, 126). Engaging in part with what Kidada Williams terms "the vernacular history of racial violence" (2012), *Southern Horrors* details nuanced ways in which lynching impacts Black women and girls, simultaneously theorizing connections between intersectionality and discourses of respectability.²

This, then, is not your average counter-origin story. In this essay, I enrich, without displacing, existing scholarship exploring Wells's efforts to halt the abjection of Black life. I join historians Crystal Feimster and Paula Giddings as they consider how Wells exposed the hypocrisy of white male chivalry (i.e., the lynching-as-rape-prevention thesis) and made visible the complicity of white women in the devastation of Black families by way of what Patricia Hill Collins describes as "paradigms of intersectionality where race, class, and gender are seen as mutually constructing systems of oppression" (*Southern Horrors*, 20). In conversation with Daina Ramey Berry, Kali Nicole Gross, and Talitha LeFlouria, this chapter constitutes a departure from critical inquiries that regard Wells's analyses of the effects of lynching on Black women and girls as tangential. Instead, I offer a reading of Wells's hybrid text as an intellectual and activist gesture toward a fuller recuperation of Black bodies. Not a compilation of statistics or persuasive linguistic strategies alone, *Southern Horrors* functions as an intersectional, epistemological site working to destabilize racialized and patriarchal logics of subjection. Moreover, it shifts registers of meaning associated with faith, class, age, and region in order to undercut the perpetuation of violence against African Americans prevalent in 19th- and early 20th-century America. Through an examination of selected sections of Wells's pamphlet, I place Wells within an essential intellectual genealogy of Black female identity and experience.

3.1 In the Beginning

The preamble of *Southern Horrors* is comprised of three parts: the author's prefatory comments written in New York in October of 1892, a dedication to those responsible for the pamphlet's

publication, and a letter from Frederick Douglass. The preamble reflects Wells's understanding of consequences, both privilege and disadvantage, correlated with Blackness at the intersection of racial and gender norms. Beginning the pamphlet this way, Wells wrests control from white citizens in Memphis seeking to silence her. She harnesses their power in order to establish a Black female voice as multifaceted and authoritative.

For instance, the first line of the third paragraph in Wells's prefatory letter reads: "[*Southern Horrors*] is not a shield for the despoiler of virtue, nor altogether a defense for the poor blind Afro-American Sampsons who suffer themselves to be betrayed by white Deliahs" (*Southern Horrors*, 25). According to Shirley Wilson Logan, this declaration signals Wells's sole allusion to Christian imagery in the pamphlet, a decided move away from conventional expectations of women speakers and writers of the time (82). Distinguishing herself from predecessors such as Maria Stewart and Sojourner Truth, who before and during the time of Wells's birth into slavery frequently invoked Christianity in order to buttress argumentative claims, Wells constructs an anti-lynching position largely irrespective of ideologies binding women to religious imperative. In addition to creating a discursive space outside of gendered standards of intellectual and cultural performance, this passing mention of Christianity instantiates one of the text's central goals: as opposed to exonerating justifiable crimes of rape (interracial or otherwise), Wells draws attention to the majority of Black male lynch victims falsely accused of assaulting white women and to the overwhelming consensuality of interracial relationships.

Following Wells's own letter are the text's dedication as well as Douglass's missive. "To the Afro-American women of New York and Brooklyn, whose race love, earnest zeal and unselfish effort at Lyric Hall, in the city of New York, on the night of October 5, 1892—made possible its publication, this pamphlet is gratefully dedicated by the author," writes Wells (*Southern Horrors*, 27). Seemingly an innocuous expression of authorial gratitude, it is also an implicit suggestion of the far-reaching impact of cohesive Black political action, particularly the sweeping possibilities of the collective resistance of Black women across boundaries of faith, class, and region. In Douglass's letter, he proceeds to endorse the authority of Wells's lived experience, commending her anti-lynching project as unparalleled. Glowingly, he asserts,

There has been no word equal to [yours] in convincing power. I have spoken, but my word is feeble in comparison. You give us what you know and testify from actual knowledge [...] Brave woman! you have done your people and mine a service which can neither be weighed nor measured.

(*Southern Horrors*, 28)

Although Douglass's letter lent credence to Wells's ideas, it is crucial that the former's words appear secondary to Wells's own opening remarks. The centering of her voice above that of a male counterpart frames the Black female subject position as legitimate despite entrenched intraracial biases toward male prerogatives and leadership, while effecting an ethos of inclusivity and collaboration. In *Southern Horrors*' three introductory parts, then—Wells's letter, the text's dedication, and Douglass's epistle—she spotlights Black women's unique vulnerabilities and agency.

After the preamble, the first division of Wells's pamphlet, "The Offense," relies heavily on citational rhetoric, opening with a transcription of a section of the infamous editorial mentioned in her prefatory letter. The May 21, 1892, issue of the *Free Speech* ends with Wells's bold challenge to white male claims to universal white female purity:

Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will overreach them—

selves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.

(*Southern Horrors*, 29)³

Next, Wells inserts vitriolic commentary from two white newspapers in Memphis, the *Daily Commercial* and the *Evening Scimitar*, that responded to her editorial: respectively, “[t]he fact that a black scoundrel is allowed to live and utter such loathsome and repulsive calumnies is a volume of evidence as to the wonderful patience of Southern whites. But we have had enough of it,” and

[i]f the negros themselves do not apply the remedy without delay it will be the duty of those whom *he* has attacked to tie the *wretch* who utters these calumnies to a stake at the intersection of Main and Madison Sts., brand *him* in the forehead with a hot iron and perform upon *him* a surgical operation with a pair of tailor’s shears.

(*Southern Horrors*, 30; *my emphasis*)⁴

Wells then details the ways in which not “the lawless element upon which the devilry of the South is usually saddled—but the leading business men, in their leading business centre” conspired to exile her and Mr. Fleming, co-owner of the *Free Speech*, before dismantling their offices.

In the first quote above, the white rhetor isolates the utterance of “such loathsome and repulsive calumnies” as the “crime” inciting diminished white male tolerance and subsequent threats to pursue more aggressive retaliation. Accordingly, Wells undermines white mobs’ rationalizations of lynching as a justifiable punishment for the rape of white women. As with the vicious murders of Moss, McDowell, and Stewart, an absence of the crime of rape is glaring in the context of this lynching threat outlined by whites in their own words. In the second quotation, the language of the white rhetor shifts from an early application of the term “wretch” in reference to Wells to the repeated use of a masculine pronoun to refer to her and her unacceptable critique of the chastity of white Southern women. To be sure, the description of the retribution awaiting the composer of the damning editorial does not advocate an indiscriminate crime. It invokes castration.

Thus, Wells’s positioning of these excerpted passages foregrounds tropic movement toward a masculine referent, movement symptomatic of white preoccupation with hyperbolic Black phallic power (Daniels 2000, 199). Within another register, the placement of the word “wretch” in tension with multiple male signifiers symbolizes the crisis in subjectivity induced by Wells’s critique. The pronoun shift, then, represents an attempt to linguistically (and ultimately, materially) erase the ability of a Black woman to publicly assert such damaging statements. As the presence of the word “wretch” demonstrates, Carmack fails to fully execute this erasure.⁵

Wells’s focus upon these and other stories in the first section of *Southern Horrors*—stories Crenshaw dubs the “lifeblood of social movements” today—denotes the vacuity of narratives identifying rape as the primary motivation for lynching, and reveals lynching as a process by which Black women, too, are criminalized. By exposing that “[e]ven verbal criticism of widely accepted beliefs *about* white women by an African American woman can elicit the same response” as veritable physical aggression against white women, Wells discloses institutionalized investment in Black women’s subordination (Miller 2000, 9; *emphasis in original*). As Erika Miller relates further,

Wells’s stories ... undermine rigidly established conceptions of race, gender, class, and sexuality. For they show that, contrary to popular opinion, blacks are not inherently

immoral, nor whites inherently moral. Likewise, they show that white women are not naturally passive and passionless, nor black women extraordinarily sexual.

(2000, 13)

Disrupting sedimented perspectives, Wells allows for the possibility of white male and white female hypersexuality.

Ultimately, Wells's framework resists classificatory expedients which seek to represent the "truth" of whiteness, Blackness, masculinity, and femininity, understanding truth as always already mediated. Indeed, such intersectional perspectives are evident in our 21st-century present, in the work of Crenshaw, and in many others besides. Michelle Duster, author and great-granddaughter of Wells, draws parallels between her forebear's activism and that of Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza of Black Lives Matter, as well as that of Lucy McBath and Sybrina Fulton, mothers of teenaged sons murdered in 2012 (Jordan Davis and Trayvon Martin, respectively) (Duster 2021, 119–21). To Duster's catalog, I would add activists and writers on freedom and Black being including bell hooks, Alice Walker, Barbara Christian, Hazel Carby, and Hortense Spillers. And I would add activists and writers on community-building and abolition such as Melissa Harris-Perry, Glory Edim, and Mariame Kaba. For Duster, "The similarities in response to Black progress [past and present] have surged interest in the tactics used by Ida and her contemporaries to navigate a hostile social environment" (2021, 88). Discerning commonalities between the administrations of Woodrow Wilson and Donald Trump, Duster invites us to construct intellectual genealogies comprised of change-makers, of those who take difference seriously and refute it as an alibi for socioeconomic injustice.

3.2 Undermining Lynching Apologia

The second division of Wells's pamphlet, "The Black and White of It," continues in this vein, documenting white female sexual attraction to and romantic love for Black men. Wells supplies an opening anecdote wherein a minister's wife, Mrs. J. S. Underwood of Ohio, admits to her husband her rationale for lying about being raped by a married, African American man—William Offett—who was subsequently imprisoned for the crime:

I had several reasons for telling you. One was the neighbor saw the fellows [*sic*] here, another was, I was afraid I had contracted a loathsome disease, and still another was that I feared I might give birth to a Negro baby. I hoped to save my reputation by telling you a deliberate lie.

(*Southern Horrors*, 33)

This instance of deceit, not by a "common" white woman but by "a lady of the highest respectability" (*Southern Horrors*, 32) wedded to a man of the cloth, performs intersectional work. It casts white female passion beyond the imposed confines of the lower-class and de-links morality (as conceived by majority culture) from whiteness. Given the constraints of white patriarchal power and privilege in this historical moment, Mrs. J. S. Underwood's crime exceeds the racialized nature of her sexual indiscretion; both the desire itself and the interracial implications of that desire constitute crimes.⁶

In the final paragraphs of "The Black and White of It," Wells addresses the exclusion inherent in arguments for lynching as a means to protect the sanctity of womanhood:

Hence there is a growing demand among Afro-Americans that the guilt or innocence of parties accused of rape be fully established. They know the men of the section of

the country who refuse this are not so desirous of punishing rapists as they pretend. The utterances of the leading white men show that with them it is not the crime but the *class*. Bishop Fitzgerald has become apologist for lynchers of the rapists of *white* women only. Governor Tillman, of South Carolina, in the month of June, standing under the tree in Barnwell, S.C., on which eight Afro-Americans were hung last year, declared that he would lead a mob to lynch a *negro* who raped a *white* woman. So say the pulpits, officials and newspapers of the South. But when the victim is a colored woman it is different.

(*Southern Horrors*, 36–7; *emphasis in original*)

Wells alludes to a crucial discrepancy, one which designates lynching as means to protect the vulnerable yet excises Black women from that protective sphere. In fact, legal measures seldom safeguard Black women and girls from the sexual aggression of white men, despite the ubiquity of the latter. As historian Kidada Williams relates, prosecutors of white male rapists

often presented their cases to all-white, male jurors who, often embracing the white-supremacist claims that black women and girls never refused sex and were always available to satisfy white men's needs, were unlikely to convict these men of raping black females.

(2012, 110)⁷

Still, activists and clubwomen such as Wells and Pauline Hopkins, along with “victims and their families[,] demanded responses from local authorities and ensured that even if authorities failed to bring rapists to justice, members of the larger community knew what transpired” (2012, 110).

And in another example of intersectional critique, Wells challenges the power of white Southern men who codify laws against miscegenation from which they remain fully exempt. Wells proceeds to introduce six occasions in which Black girls such as Maggie Reece and Mildrey Brown, years shy of adolescence, were sexually assaulted by adult white men. Not surprisingly, not a single lynching was staged by whites in order to avenge these acts. Wells reports,

Last winter in Baltimore, Md., three white ruffians assaulted a Miss Camphor, a young Afro-American girl ... They held her escort and outraged the girl. It was a deed dastardly enough to arouse Southern blood, which gives its horror of rape as excuse for lawlessness, but she was an Afro-American.

(*Southern Horrors*, 37)

Similarly unsettling accounts such as that of Pat Hanifan, a white man who raped a young Black girl and was later promoted to the rank of detective in the Nashville Police Department after just six months in jail, and “a white man in Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory, [who] two months ago inflicted such injuries upon another Afro-American child that she died,” reinforce Wells's contention that prevailing justifications for lynching are fallacious due to an abundance of lynching crimes in which the crime of rape has not even been committed, but also because such crimes committed against Black girls go altogether unpunished (*Southern Horrors*, 37).⁸ By framing the issue of interracial rape by white men through the intersectional category of age, and centering the trauma of Black children, Wells subverts exploitative tropes of Black women's hypersexuality.

3.3 Risk and Respectability

The last section in the first half of the pamphlet, “The New Cry,” merits critical attention for its examination of Black women’s and girls’ experiences as lynching victims, rather than uniformly as the mothers, sisters, and wives of those predominantly at risk. The efforts of Wells and her contemporaries to counter contradictory portrayals by white journalists with their own stories reflected “appreciation for the vernacular history of racial violence and the ways that violence affected women disproportionately as the actual victims of violence and as the female survivors of assaulted and slain men,” notes Williams (2012, 129). In enumerating “the dark and bloody record of the South show[ing] 728 Afro-Americans lynched during the past 8 years,” Wells references “the hanging of a fifteen year old girl in Louisiana” and “a woman in Jackson, Tenn., and one in Hollendale, Miss.” As historian Talitha LeFlouria confirms,

Black women were hung from trees, shot, and burned. The “offenses” that motivated these killings were vast. Some were murdered for assaulting or killing a white person (usually through self-defense). Others lost their lives for destroying and stealing white property, issuing verbal threats against white assailants (male and female), resisting rape, and daring to testify against white men.

(2019, 178)

Likewise, “Pregnant women were sometimes lynched” (173), LeFlouria reveals, including sisters Maggie and Alma House in 1918, as well as Mary Turner and her unborn child, in the same year. In 1911, “Raped before she was murdered, Laura Nelson joined roughly 200 other Black female lynching victims” (2020, 107), observe Daina Ramey Berry and Kali Gross. Wells distinguishes precarity at the nexus of race, gender, and class across the 1880s and 1890s US South.

And yet, so as to instruct, but not dismiss the well-intentioned of her race within “The New Cry,” Wells also counters the argument of those “thoughtful Afro-Americans” that contend that the Black race should “fit itself for government” and forego political rights as a means to alleviate the lynching epidemic and to achieve peace (*Southern Horrors*, 39). Based on Wells’s research, it was during the previous eight years in which Black people had demonstrated said “fitness” that lynching had increased exponentially. Therefore, Wells issues a strident critique of respectability politics—a critique not unlike those of intersectional thinkers Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Audre Lorde, and LaMonda Horton-Stallings today. More specifically, Wells invokes statistics and American commonplaces such as education and fiscal responsibility in order to problematize Black representativeness. “Even to the better class of Afro-Americans the crime of rape is so revolting that they have too often taken the white man’s word and given lynch law neither the investigation nor condemnation it deserved,” writes Wells, emphasizing how white supremacy contorts elevated social status into a vehicle for intra-racial suspicion and estrangement. Wells asserts,

They forget that a concession of the right to lynch a man for a certain crime, not only concedes the right to lynch any person for any crime, but [...] it is in a fair way to stamp us as a race of rapists and desperadoes. They have gone on hoping and believing that general education and financial strength would solve the difficulty, and are devoting their energies to the accumulation of both.

(*Southern Horrors*, 39)

Wells privileges broad communal accountability over shallow racial or class unanimity.

Eradicating lynching, then, is in no way contingent upon Black improvement, in Wells's view. And class-inflected silence does not just signal complicity. It encourages lynching for a range of acts, reinforcing Blackness as a symbol of criminality and sexual deviance.⁹ Contemporary #SayHerName organizers, too, apprehend as much, as they condemn the weaponization of respectability rhetoric in the context of police brutality and related forms of state violence. Given that cisgendered, heterosexual Black men remain overrepresented as subjects of racialized violence in the 21st century, #SayHerName humanizes Black women and girls as worthy of life, and just as worthy of dignity in death, as males in their communities. Accordingly, in Episode 21 of the African American Policy Forum's *Under the Blacklight* series, #SayHerName activists speak directly to respectability as docility. Suggesting that "anyone who's not controllable becomes a law enforcement problem," they unsettle middle-class notions of compliance as panacea (2020). Echoing Wells's intellectual and political thought from over a century ago, they name mischaracterization of victims of violence and their families as unethical and wrong, refusing attributions of the latter to Blackness in and of itself.

3.4 Helping Ourselves

Next, in "The South's Position," Wells disrupts teleological narratives insistent that the treatment of Black people has improved since the legal end of slavery. Moreover, she emphasizes region as an intersectional facet of identity and experience, finally equating the Antebellum South with the New South (*Southern Horrors*, 47). Contrary to the ways the US South promoted itself in the wake of the Civil War—that is, as commercially and politically progressive—Wells clarifies that Black Southern workers, in particular, endure hyper-exploitative labor conditions. The spectacular violence of lynching, white Southerners' response to purported sexual savagery, exacerbates long-standing economic subordination of Black communities while intensifying divisions between white and Black workers. Wells opposes conditions of racial and economic dispossession designed to maximize profit margins, and, ultimately, to lure domestic and foreign capital. Such conditions obscure Black pain and obstruct the potential for interracial labor organizing.¹⁰

As Giddings maintains, the myth of the Black rapist

might have been the product of a tortured imagination and the need to control blacks, served to ease the aching sexual tensions and moral contradictions of the industrial age, kept restless white women too fearful and obedient to their protectors to wander into the public sphere, and helped to bring whites of opposing class interests into a one-party political system.

(2008, 226)

But she continues, "the vicious stereotype in the southern press [...] was largely constructed for the consumption of the North": "the New South wasn't new at all; it was the Old South, replete with its past promiscuities of thought, action, greed, and hatred" (226). Here, Wells calls for a "healthy public sentiment" attuned to the very particular horrors of Black work and life in the US South (*Southern Horrors*, 49).¹¹

Wells ends *Southern Horrors* with a section entitled "Self-Help" in which she forwards a three-fold approach by which "the Afro-American can do for himself what no one else can do for him" (*Southern Horrors*, 50). Wells's strategy includes emigration, boycotting, and expanding the influence and support of the Black press. For instance, Wells describes boycotting several street car companies in both Memphis and Kentucky. In referencing the near catastrophic impact of these tactics on white Southern businesses, Wells declares, "The appeal to the white man's

pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience” (*Southern Horrors*, 51). “Self-help also meant an activist strategy” for figures like Wells, a strategy “that no longer depended solely on elites, but looked toward an intraclass insurgency in which the laboring class of blacks was central” (Giddings 2008, 227). Though those responsible for the lynching of Moss, McDowell, and Stewart were not formally punished, Wells’s communal advocacy pushed whites in Memphis to express public disapproval of the violence.

Wells also examines Black emigration and its repercussions for white public and private spheres. In fact, thousands of Black people moved from Memphis to Oklahoma at the behest of Wells and other community organizers following the infamous March 1892 lynching. Elaborating on this matter in Chapter 7 of her unfinished autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, Wells writes,

The daily papers, which had helped to make this trouble by fanning the flames of race prejudice which encouraged, aided, and abetted the lynching, now sought to stop this westward movement by printing tales of hardship undergone by those who had already gone West. They kept this up for some time, telling of the starvation, and of hostile Indians who had made those who had gone not welcome, and urging the colored people who were still in Memphis to stay among friends where there were no such dangers.

(2020, 50)

Once emigration and other modes of agitation began to produce the desired results, white journalists resorted to stereotypical renderings of Indigenous communities to try to suppress further movement. Negating journalists’ intentions to mask white subjection, Wells refuted dominant discourses of incivility and pastoral tropes of white–Black amity. And as would participants in subsequent exoduses, including the Great Migration, Wells understood mobility as sacrifice, but as a sacrifice with the potential to restructure relationships to a racialized social order.

Furthermore, Wells declares,

The Afro–American papers are the only ones which will print the truth, and they lack means to employ agents and detectives to get at the facts. The race must rally a mighty host to the support of their journals, and thus enable them to do much in the way of investigation.

(*Southern Horrors*, 52).

Wells’s words point to the necessity of an authoritative, qualified Black press, buoyed by paid subscriptions, in order to eliminate lynching. Similarly, intersectionality-minded #SayHerName activists today leverage social media and other platforms to combat the purported inhumanity of victims of police violence, as well as juridical practices and news outlets endeavoring to blame victims for their own deaths.

Lastly, Wells spotlights racial and gender bias in “Self-Help,” making clear that the few instances in which a planned lynching was successfully averted were when Blacks in Florida and Kentucky equipped themselves with arms to ward off impending attacks (*Southern Horrors*, 51–2). Wells states,

The lesson this teaches and which every Afro–American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give. When the white man who

is always the aggressor knows he runs as great risk of biting the dust ... he will have greater respect for Afro-American life.

(52)

Male signifiers notwithstanding, it is of paramount importance that Wells ends with a strain of militant discourse and that she situates the gun to be used to deter white violence in the “black home,” an arena posited as a woman’s rightful place in Wells’s era. Wells demands respect for Black subjects through force if necessary, reminding white and Black audiences that the site wherein they strive to constrain and confine her is where she will be waiting with open arms.

3.5 Conclusion

William Greaves’s documentary, *Ida B. Wells: A Passion for Justice*, features the late Toni Morrison reading excerpts from Wells’s aforementioned autobiography. Citing Chapter 8 of Wells’s text, Morrison’s indelible delivery reminds us of the significance of Wells’s Black nationalist inclinations, the inception of which is often attributed to Black male leaders. “I had bought a pistol the first thing after Tom Moss was lynched,” Morrison intones, “because I expected some cowardly retaliation from the lynchers” (2020, 53). Wells’s assertion of anti-integrationist sentiment of this ilk drew criticism from whites and Blacks alike.

Yet, Morrison’s recitation throughout the film—her articulation of Wells’s sense of the hypocrisy of white male chivalry, of limitations of mainstream feminist coalition, and of concrete tactics to counter the pervasiveness of anti-Black terror—I argue, brings Black women’s collective voice, past and present, into focus as a reservoir of intersectional activism and epistemology. Indeed, from its three introductory sections through its six interrelated chapters, *Southern Horrors* offers an incisive critique of lynching, while expanding public understanding of the sphere of collusion contributing to its persistence in and beyond Morrison’s own time.

In the end, this chapter does not seek to install Wells as the sole harbinger of intersectional analysis, deposing all others. Still, Wells’s stories—“lifeblood,” as Crenshaw reminds us—destabilize conventional paradigms of whiteness, Blackness, femininity, and masculinity in ways compatible with contemporary social justice organizing and agitation, ways that we would all do well to remember. Rather than reducing Black womanhood to a peripheral entity within the lynching dialectic, Wells theorizes subjection determined by age, class, and region, recuperating meaning and value associated with Black communities that the nation-state would much rather forget.

Notes

- 1 I use Wells here instead of Wells-Barnett because the author was unmarried at the time of the publication of *Southern Horrors*.
- 2 Building on the work of Edward Baptiste, Williams describes vernacular histories of racial violence this way: “Testimony was the primary way that many black victims and witnesses resisted violence and then thereby communicated who they thought they were in relation to the traumatic injuries they endured. Indeed, African Americans’ experiences of racial violence informed their development of a rich, complex, and original public record of their lives after slavery. It is this narrative of triumph over the adversity of slavery and subsequent racial discrimination, violent suffering, and consequent survival that motivated blacks to mobilize against racial injustice and to demand that the country live up to its democratic principles by rejecting violence and advancing civil rights reform” (2012, 8).
- 3 Notably, Wells intentionally uses the term “rape” in her public and private discourse. As Giddings remarks, “She was one of the few women reformers who actually used the word *rape*, and had learned to do so without apology” (Giddings 2008, 228–9.).

- 4 Michelle Duster names *Southern Horrors*, among other texts by Wells, as modes of “data journalism.” In Duster’s estimation, Wells “scoured articles by white correspondents and in white-owned newspapers, combining those findings with the statistics she was able to pull from sources that she ultimately democratized by putting them in one place” (2021, 110). Moreover, Wells brought wider awareness here to the fact that, as Ericka Miller observes, the reaction to Wells’s editorial by white newspapermen “openly implies that such a perverse and brutal torture [that of lynching] is the appropriate response to an expression of intellectual opinion” (Miller 2000, 9).
- 5 Miller’s aforementioned work likewise examines the etymology of “wretch” as a gendered term in this era in the US South. And, in Wells’s autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, Wells identifies the author of this particular lynching threat against her as a man named Carmack (2020, 57).
- 6 Before preparing to offer additional narratives to support her assertion of the wealth of Southern white women who regularly engage in the vigorous sexual pursuit of Black men, Wells succinctly clarifies, “Most of these cases were reported by the daily papers of the South” (*Southern Horrors*, 33). This marks a rhetorical gesture away from that of the pamphlet’s previous section in which she tended to textually privilege direct quotations from white male newspaper articles to buttress her message. Now seemingly mentioning the Southern newspapers as an afterthought, Wells seems to adopt a new rhetorical posture here. She configures her recitation of these cases of voluntary interracial relationships instigated by white women as expert and as the only authority necessary to substantiate her claims.
- 7 Bettina Aptheker (amongst others) asserts similar claims, stating, “Just as rape was used to justify the lynching of Black men, so the mythology of the Black woman’s sexual promiscuity and aggression were the main ideological vehicles used to ‘explain’ the appetite of white men for black women” (1982, 62). And according to Angela Davis, “At worst, [‘the fictional Black rapist’] is an aggression against Black people as a whole, for the mythical rapist implies the mythical whore” (1981, 191).
- 8 See also Feimster 2009, 93; Bay 2009, 126. Bay also writes, Frederick Douglass’s “discussions of lynching left the question of white violence against black women aside in favor of a qualified defense of black men that did not fully link lynching and Jim Crow” (129).
- 9 Michelle Duster, Wells’s great-granddaughter also observes, “When Ida wrote [...] about the lynching of the three grocers, she highlighted how the murders’ implication of violence against any Black person, at any time, kept the surrounding community terrorized and economically disenfranchised for a generation” (2021, 109). I argue that the ritualization of lynching hinged upon Black representativeness—a “you’re next” sort of ideology—that also manifested in Black folks’ own acceptance of lynching as appropriate for certain crimes.
- 10 See also: Davis 1981, 190.
- 11 Still, Wells extends her argument beyond the particularities of the Southern United States, the perniciousness of whose racism might be dismissed by some as extremist or as aberration, to address an evoked audience of national proportions. Accordingly, she observes, “Lynch law has spread its insidious influence till men in New York State, Pennsylvania and on the free Western plains feel they can take the law into their own hands with impunity, especially where an Afro-American is concerned. The South is brutalized to a degree not realized by its own inhabitants, and the very foundation of government, law and order, are imperilled” (*Southern Horrors*, 47). Wells names Northern cities and western regions of the country in order to convey urgency, while hinging the viability of the nation itself upon an immediate resolution of the lynching crisis.

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4

UNGENDERING INTERSECTIONALITY AND REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Returning to Hortense Spillers's “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”

Alys Eve Weinbaum

It is commonplace in many accounts of intersectionality produced in the US academy to provide an intellectual genealogy of the concept/method/praxis that attributes it to Black, Indigenous, and/or women of color feminisms.¹ Oftentimes this means situating Kimberlé Crenshaw’s or Patricia Hill Collins’s contributions at the origin.² At other times it entails attending to theoretical and activist production before and after Crenshaw and Collins. Though they usually do not invoke the term “intersectionality,” earlier contributions treat overlapping or interlocking modalities of oppression and exploitation including racism, sexism, and capitalism, and explore the formation of the complex identities that systems of power, when combined, produce and foreclose. As Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge observe in their overview of intersectionality, the quest to set “the history of intersectionality straight” is invariably fraught in that it assumes the possibility of narrating a pure lineage. The drive for purity too often neglects contributions to what they shorthand “race/class/gender” that were made from the late 1960s through the 1980s that emerge out of the complex interplay among academic theorizing, on-the-ground activism, and social mobilization.³ Having noted existing scholarly struggles over origination and ownership, in my reading I nonetheless have found that the genealogies of intersectionality most often proffered recycle a predictable selection of Black feminist and woman of color thinkers: Crenshaw (always), Patricia Hill Collins (usually), and, additionally (in varying combination), Toni Cade Bambara, Frances Beal, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, other members of the Combahee River Collective, members of the Third World Woman’s Alliance, members of the National Black Feminist Organization, Audre Lorde, Angela Y. Davis, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Beverly Lindsay, and Deborah King.⁴ Strikingly, across genealogies, there is an otherwise well-known, influential, and oft-cited Black feminist theorist who is almost invariably left out of the intersectional pantheon: Hortense Spillers.⁵

In this chapter, I seek to address what I regard as an instructive omission by situating Spillers as a foundational contributor to and, at once, an important critic of intersectional thinking. I do so by returning to her 1987 article, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar

Book.”⁶ I treat this watershed contribution to Black feminism in order to move the theory of intersectionality in a perhaps counterintuitive direction—toward a focus on ungendering and toward recognition of Atlantic slavery as an especially important historical conjuncture for thinking about the relationship between intersectionality and reproductive justice (the latter is a movement that emerged from Black feminist and woman of color organizing that I will discuss at greater length shortly). Overall, I propose reconsideration of Spillers’s contribution as a theory of intersectionality that is focused above all on the power dynamics that attend the foreclosure of the intersection of gender and race, and thus on the historical and ongoing refusal of those in power to bring gender and race together as they consolidate racial capitalism and ensure its expansion. In particular, I argue for a reading that highlights Spillers’s account of enslaved reproduction as a process of violent ungendering—as a racial capitalist process that depends upon the negation of gender differentiation at the origin. I also suggest, following Spillers’s lead, that the powerful negation of gender at its intersection with race that was first brewed up in slavery, has subsequently been forwarded into our present. Today it contours the racial capitalist system in which we live. As we shall see in what follows, Spillers offers a robustly materialist account of what we might think of as the enslaver’s ideology of anti-intersectionality, a feminist account of racial capitalism, and, too, deep insight into the role that the form of ungendered reproduction brewed up in slavery might yet play in forging a truly expansive and substantively inclusive conceptualization of reproductive justice in the present.

From one perspective Spillers’s article is primarily about the mistaken attribution of a matriarchal function to enslaved women. It has thus been frequently treated as a signal contribution to the study of slavery and its afterlives. What makes Spillers’s contribution especially interesting when thinking about intersectionality—and what may indeed provide at least the beginning of an explanation for why Spillers is routinely left out of accounts of the concept’s genealogy—is her article’s focus not on the production of gender per se, but rather on a historical conjuncture in which gender is prevented from intersecting with race. Instead of presuming that gender exists a priori, that it given, and that it ought to be a primary category of analysis, as almost all intersectional theorists do,⁷ Spillers moves with and beyond gender in order to show us that ungendering is inextricably bound up with the history of reproduction in slavery, that ungendering subtends the afterlife of slavery, and, ultimately, that ungendering is an ideological and material process that constitutes a continuously evolving technology of power in racial capitalism.

As I have argued elsewhere, what was at one point in time unselfconsciously referred to as slave “breeding” ought today to be recognized as *the* biotechnology *avant la lettre* that facilitated the reproduction of the racial formations that made slave racial capitalism go.⁸ Here, I follow Spillers in arguing that the racializing logic of enslaved reproduction continues to subtend the reproduction of evolving forms of racial capitalism. And, I build on Spillers’s speculative conclusions to meditate on how ungendering might yet be reappropriated by those seeking to interrupt racial capitalist expansion and the myriad reproductive injustices it creates and upon which it relies. Put otherwise, I read Spillers’s article as a prescient theorization of the racial capitalist deployment of and dependence on anti-intersectionality as an ideological tool with material effects. Anti-intersectionality enabled the forms of dehumanization that subtended racial capitalism at the outset. Simultaneously, I follow Spillers in suggesting that when reappropriated, anti-intersectionality might yet be mobilized to buttress an expansive range of basic human rights including the right to reproduce children and kinship according to one’s own lights, needs, and desires regardless of one’s gender.

According to Loretta Ross and other founders and proponents of the contemporary reproductive justice movement, these basic human rights—which have been in the past too often

whittled down by mainstream feminists to the right to choose to abort—ought to be instead conceptualized as inclusive of the right to have a child under conditions of one’s own choosing; the right not to be pregnant and thus to freely access birth control, abortion, and abstinence; and the right to parent in a safe and healthy environment free from individual and state violence.⁹ The movement for reproductive justice, in other words, links an assessment of gendered and racialized violence to a critique of the unequal distribution of resources. It is deeply antiracist in its critique of the whiteness (and the class aspirations) of abortion-centered reproductive politics. And it is robustly materialist in its recognition of the connection between the achievement of reproductive freedom and the eradication of racialized economic injustice. For these reasons, reproductive justice is fittingly considered by activists involved in its pursuit, as by scholars who treat it in their academic work, as constitutively intersectional in conceptualization and praxis.

There are, however, two blind spots that characterize reproductive justice work. Most often gender is taken as given insofar as reproduction is cast by activists and scholars alike as a process that pertains to those identified as female.¹⁰ And, second, there is an understandable tendency in reproductive justice work to focus on economic injustice in the present rather than on the historical extraction and accumulation of reproductive labor in the long history of racial capitalism. In sum, within reproductive justice work, as in scholarship about it, reproduction is mobilized as a gendered referent that is too often stabilized and naturalized instead of historicized.¹¹ Relatedly, although race and reproduction are understood to be linked, the join between them is reified rather than treated as a process that has been and must be continuously recalibrated over racial capitalism’s *longue durée*. What a return to Spillers’s account of reproduction in slavery opens up for consideration is the possibility of conceptualization of reproduction as *a biological process that was unhinged from gender* at a formative historical conjuncture and within an economic system out of which contemporary racial capitalism has been built. For this reason, it is useful to think of Spillers’s contribution to intersectionality as moving in two divergent directions: it helps us to think of anti-intersectionality as formative for racial capitalism. And, through its attention to the ungendering of reproduction in slavery, it clears the way for imagining a truly expansive iteration of reproductive justice that is pertinent to all human beings, regardless of gender.

Such a turn to Spillers’s theorization of anti-intersectionality as a technology of power, it must be pointed out, involves a perverse bending of ideas about the ungendering of the enslaved. Indeed, as I elaborate in the final section of the present chapter, it involves drawing out Spillers’s evocative ideas about ungendering by setting the history of reproduction in slavery against itself, and, in so doing, setting it to work in the interest of promoting a wide conceptualization of “humanity”—in fact, nothingless than an alternative vision of humanity (and the corresponding figure of “the human”) that recognizes humanity’s implicit racialization as white and male, and, in so doing, opposes itself to racial capitalism instead of abetting the ongoing dispossession of all the various beings who reproduce our world.

To Tread on Dangerous Ground

“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” opens with a call to readers to recognize what Spillers labels the “American grammar” that disavows, as it advances, the process of ungendering in the Atlantic world. She notes that there is a long tradition, one that the infamous Moynihan Report tapped into and extended into decades of social policy, that insists on imposing a matriarchal designation on Black women who have been denied the right to be recognized as mothers and were in slavery expressly dispossessed of the ability to lay claim to their children. As Spillers details, enslaved women and their progeny were subject to Slave Law and specifically to the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*. This doctrine (originally derived from Roman law) was first imposed in

North America in the middle of the 17th century and rapidly became pervasive throughout the antebellum Atlantic world. Its purpose was to ensure that children born to the enslaved followed the status of the wombs from which they emerged. Such children were regarded as alienable and fungible chattel, not as human beings belonging to those who gave them life. The history of *partus* that Spillers invokes has been powerfully detailed by feminist historians of slavery.¹² Together with Spillers, these historians demonstrate how slavery forced the enslaved to reproduce her own and her progeny's kinlessness, to reproduce what sociologist Orlando Patterson influentially describes as "natal alienation,"¹³ and to become complexly marked as non-mother, an ungendered figure whom Spillers, paradoxically, most often refers to as "the captive female".

In ungendering the captive female, *partus* violently extracted reproduction and unhinged in vivo labor from motherhood and thus from gender as it was defined in a world that starkly separated (white) female reproduction from (white) male production in the process of shoring up an emergent ideology of separate spheres. Put otherwise, a slave who conceived, gestated, and gave birth to chattel was in no way recognizable to enslavers as a rightful mother of the child reproduced by her body and her in vivo processes.¹⁴ As Spillers cautions, it is for this reason that "one treads dangerous ground in suggesting an equation between female gender and mothering" in slavery (78). The enslaved is simultaneously "mother and mother dispossessed" (80). Indeed, "the problematizing of gender" that marks the captive female "places her ... out of the traditional symbolics of female gender" (80) as expressed and upheld by those in power. The reproductive body's enslavement negates the possibility that its conception, gestation, and parturition can be regarded as labors that are mother-making and therefore conferring of conventionally gender-marked identity. In contrast to the mid-20th-century French feminist foremother, Simone De Beauvoir, who argued in her existential treatise on "the second sex" that in the act of giving birth to a child a woman gives birth to herself as a mother, no such (falsely) universal processes of self-predication applies to the captive female.¹⁵ For the enslaved, being autochthonous in this way was both a de jure and de facto impossibility. As historians of slavery concur, the enslaved was considered unnatural and monstrous, never properly maternal in regard to her own children. And yet, paradoxically, as an enslaved "mammy" she was thought to be uniquely suited to nurture the master's children.¹⁶ As historians further demonstrate, it was fantasized by those who subjected them to sexual ab/use that enslaved women were inured to the violations that transformed them against their will into "breeders." In sum, they were treated as if they were sexually lascivious and inherently unrapable; as if they could give birth without enduring the pain associated with the reproductive process as it was thought to be experienced by white women; and, not least, as if they could undertake hard labor from sunup to sundown without feeling the physical or psychological impact of pregnancy and motherhood.¹⁷

Notably, according to Spillers the process of ungendering does not begin on the New World plantation but rather in Middle Passage. As she elaborates, ungendering on the plantation is inextricably connected to and thus shaped by a psychological and mathematical thought process that emerged in the minds of enslavers as they contemplated how best to maximize their profits by figuring out how to most expeditiously fill the holds of the slave ships bound for the New World not with gendered bodies of varied origin, mother tongue, and age, but rather with abstracted quantities of "flesh." Ungendering is therefore best understood as a byproduct of a complex cognitive process that is ultimately economic in its expression in so far as it requires an abstracting calculation that begins with the reduction of the captive's female's body to a quantity of undifferentiated "flesh" that occupies a discrete amount of space aboard a ship set to depart for the New World from African shores.¹⁸

This abstracting calculation—the same abstracting calculation that subtends all forms of capitalist exchange but that is uniquely applied to human beings in the context of chattel slavery—

puts under erasure the gender identity to which the inhabitant consigned to a designated space in a ship's hold had laid claim and had imagined to be self-making and self-defining prior to her capture. As Spillers elaborates, the female captive who is stowed in the hold of the slave ship, *she* who may once have considered *herself*, and may have been considered by others to be an Indigenous African *girl* or *woman* who belonged to a particular society, community, and family, is transmogrified in and through the imagination of the enslaver into an enslaved object multiply dispossessed: of home, land, mother tongue, property, communally bequeathed identity, kin, and, not least, of “body” and of gender.¹⁹ At the end of a passage spanning several paragraphs that begins with a discussion of the famous *Brookes Plan*—the etching of the slave hold that represents how Captain Perry allocated a precise amount of space to each captive forced to board his ship, the *Brookes* (“every man slave is to be allowed six feet by one foot four inches for room, every woman five feet ten by one foot four, every boy etc.”), Spillers concludes:

Those African persons in “Middle Passage” were literally suspended in the “oceanic,” if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for the undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American” either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all. Inasmuch as, on any given day, we might imagine, the captive personality did not know where s/he was, we could say that they were the culturally “unmade,” thrown in the midst of a figurative darkness that “exposed” their destinies to an unknown course. ... We might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, not “counted”/“accounted,” or differentiated until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure. Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into “account” as quantities. The female in “Middle Passage,” as an apparently smaller physical mass, occupies “less room” in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart. (72)²⁰

While much scholarship on “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” hones in on Spillers’s elaboration of the body/flesh distinction and her ontological insight about destruction of “the Black” as human subject during Middle Passage, in highlighting the above quotation, one that comes after Spillers’s discussion of the body/flesh distinction, I wish to suggest that Spillers’s meditation on this distinction cannot in fact be recognized as the groundbreaking contribution to a theory of racial capitalism *that it is* if we do not attend to the manner in which this distinction is materially and epistemically tethered to the abstracting calculation made by the enslaver and, most crucially, the ungendering logic of racial capitalism as it was applied to “human-as-cargo” by enslavers. Put otherwise, it is precisely at the moment when Spillers trains her gaze on the ship’s hold and imagines how enslavers saw it that she theorizes Atlantic slavery as a racial capitalist enterprise that was predicated on the enslavers’ refusal of the intersection of gender and race in the process of making the captive female into a racialized and dehumanized slave.²¹ Indeed, the above passage crystallizes the role of an intellectual process, an abstracting calculation, or in Spillers’s words a counting/accounting in the transformation of captives into property, precisely because it reveals the centrality of anti-intersectional thinking to the process of human commodification, to slave racial capitalism, and, by extension, to the global expansion of racial capitalism *tout court*.

To express this in terms that will be familiar to scholars of Black Marxism—the Black radical tradition from which Spillers has been excluded but, as I argue here and elsewhere, in which

she ought to be included²²—Spillers’s contribution constitutes both a critique and an expansion of the theory of “so-called primitive accumulation” that was first proffered by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Spillers points out the holes in the traditional Marxist origin story by revealing that capitalist accumulation was bound up with an originary process of ungendering. And, she suggests that a process that began in the enslavers mind as part of the preparation for the human-as-cargo’s transport across the Atlantic ought to be understood as ongoing on the New World plantation, and, too, in the Moynihan Report and the various social, political, and ideological formations for which the Report serves as both a shorthand and a placeholder in Spillers’s article.

To express this in yet another way, Spillers ought to be recognized as both a contributor to intersectional theory and as a critic of intersectional theory because she meditates both on how and why slave-making is bound up with ungendering and thus on how and why it cannot be encapsulated or shorthanded in the linguistic repertoire that has come to be associated with (and implicitly used to express allegiance to) intersectionality as analytical method and heuristic device. Terms such as “racialized gender” or “gendered racialization” are certainly useful in numerous contexts as feminist scholars situated across the disciplines have amply demonstrated. And yet, these lego terms cannot and do not do the same theoretical and historical work that a discussion of anti-intersectionality as the ideology of enslavers and of ungendering as a centerpiece of slave-making can and does. This is because the ungendering that is materialized in and through the calculated filling of the space of the ship’s hold with commodified flesh involves not the production of gender but rather the *negation of gender* and thus the refusal of an intersection of gender and Blackness. By focusing on the ship’s hold, Spillers theorizes how processes of gendering and racialization are prevented from coming together. This both calls into question and complicates the often strident assertion of feminist scholars that intersectionality construed as method or heuristic device necessarily possesses *positive* explanatory power.

The summarize the argument thus far: Negation of the intersection of gender and race is nothing more or less than the form of power’s appearance in Atlantic slavery. More specifically, this negation of the intersection is the condition of racial capitalism’s historical emergence and expansion. By contrast with the majority of intersectional theorists who underscore the intersection of gender and race in order to stake a *positive* claim to complex subjectivities and identities that are otherwise unseen or overlooked, unattended to, or altogether disavowed, Spillers hones in on the Middle Passage as a foundational anti-intersectional event in which the gender of the captive female is negated. Moreover, she shows us that the violent refusal of the intersection of gender and race in slavery subtends the reproduction of capitalist relations of production into the present, first by making the captive into ungendered flesh, then by making the enslaved woman available as a “breeder” of chattel, and, finally, by casting the abstracting and ungendering calculation that begins with the loading of the slave ship forward in time in and through a process of ongoing racial capitalist expansion. This is a process that is amply manifest in the object of scrutiny with which Spillers begins her mediation—the Moynihan Report—and that is so vividly materialized in the invidious dispossession of Black people (male and female) that the calculus perpetuates in Spillers’s present moment of writing.

In a discussion that took place twenty years after the publication of “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Spillers joins a group of Black feminist scholars including Shelley Eversley, Farah Griffin, Saidiya Hartman, and Jennifer Morgan, in order to revisit and mine it.²³ One question the group takes up is Spillers’s relationship to the sorts of feminism being produced in her moment of writing. What is fascinating about this exchange is the degree to which Spillers understands herself to have written her essay not to critique white feminist frameworks inattentive to the intersection of gender and race in the 1980s (though she does this so well) but rather to explore what she identifies as the problem of “black women stopping at the gender

question” (304). “Stopping at the gender question,” failing to push gender out of the way as the primary object of investigation and most valued analytical lens creates a roadblock, Spillers observes, precisely because “refusal of certain gender privileges to black women historically was part of the problem” confronted by those who were and continue to be denied recognition of their womanhood and motherhood (304). In other words, because Spillers treats ungendering as epistemically and ontologically central to ongoing dehumanization of the captive female and her descendants, she understands herself to be, by necessity, pushing beyond gender as the primary object and method of analysis. As she elaborates, in writing “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” she wanted “to go *through* gender to get to something wider” (304). Spillers does not assume gender’s availability or even its presence but is instead compelled by its absence, by what happens to gender after capture of the indigenous woman, and by the violence that has been done in creating an exclusively white male claim to the status of “human being.” In short, Spillers is interested in what enables the hegemonic construction of “humanity” and in how ungendering continues to function as “humanity’s” condition of possibility.²⁴ Ultimately, Spillers casts gender as sometimes present and sometimes evaporated, foreclosed, refused, or negated. She recognizes “humanity” as one outcome or product of a process that is imbricated in longstanding and evolving forms of racialized dehumanization that are in turn predicated on the negation of the intersection of gender and race.

To underscore the salient point, for Spillers gender is neither an universal referent nor something that can be presumed as given and available for the taking by all comers. By contrast to intersectional theorists who work from the assumption that some form of gender identity is available to all—although gender is understood to be always already insufficient as the *only* mark or source of identity—Spillers focuses instead on the productive work of anti-intersectionality, offering her readers a theory of slave racial capitalism that prioritizes examination of the power of gender’s negation at the intersection with race, or more specifically, with enslaved Blackness. This is why when she wrote “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” and found herself “searching for a vocabulary” that would enable (rather than obstruct) her theoretical work, Spillers notes that she “didn’t find one that was immediately available” (301). Instead, she discovered that in order, to understand her place in a world emergent from slavery it is necessary to diagnose the aporia that structures the existing “American grammar” and to gesture toward the invention of a new grammar that is more adequate to the task at hand.

This new grammar allows for articulation of the heretofore unremarked negation of gender at the intersection with race and can be usefully thought of as tethered to “the wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility*” (original italics, 72) that is unleashed by the violent ungendering that first transpires in Middle Passage. On the one hand, the italicized term signals the sinister *possibility* to which the doctrine of *partus* attaches itself in the context of slave racial capitalism. It is the speculative *possibility* that is realized by enslavers who lay claim to “the wild and unclaimed richness” that they extract from captive flesh forced to reproduce chattel when the slave ship “gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure”(72). On the other hand, *possibility* gestures toward so much more. The term also suggests that captive flesh can transgress, that ungendering simultaneously exists as a process of profound violation and as a process with an unknown outcome—a process possessing a wild and rich potentiality that opens onto fungibility, onto flexible modes of being in the world that are irreducible to and thus exceed the abstracting logic of commodification.

This is “the wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility*” that scholars such as C. Riley Snorton and Tiffany Lethabo King (among others) locate in Spillers’s article. As Snorton influentially argues in *Black on Both Sides*, the ungendering of Blackness that first transpires in slavery can and should be linked to transness, and, conversely, transness to Blackness.²⁵ As Tiffany Lethabo King power-

fully attests in *The Black Shoals*, Blackness is not only manifest in the commodity form; it is not only a negative byproduct of African enslavement; it is also always already a fungible and thus defiant referent and thus a source of oppositional identity formation.²⁶ As King succinctly explains in a meditation on Spillers's ideas about the Black family "there is possibility and futurity when one is rendered outside of human coordinates."²⁷ In sum, the ungendering that is the legacy of slavery holds within it the possibility that Blackness always already exceeds the confines of the racial capitalist scripts created by it and for its maintenance. By way of conclusion, I offer a *possibility* that I hope to continue to think through about what this second understanding of "the wild and untamed richness" afforded by ungendering might ideally contribute to collective thinking about the process of human reproduction when it is unhinged from gender, and, by extension, what it might contribute to our collective pursuit of a form of robustly inclusive reproductive justice.

A New Semantic Field/Fold

At the end of "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Spillers swerves off the main road her argument has traveled to explore in her article's final paragraphs what she calls a new "semantic field/fold" that is afforded by coming to terms with the effects of the imposition on Black people of the myth of the "black Matriarch" (Moynihan's term) or what she in this instance labels "Mother Right" (80) (perhaps she here elects the latter in order to emphasize that so-called Black matriarchs had no rights at all but that things might be different). As she explains, for the enslaved and their descendants, "Mother Right" was and remains a "negating feature of human community" insofar as the abstracting calculus of slavery that has been passed on through time refuses motherhood to Black women, devalues Black kinship, and seeks nothing less than the decimation of Black humanity.²⁸ But Spillers reminds us, "Mother Right" is also always a false imposition—one that not only violently misnames and thus disavows the ungendering that characterized the history of enslavement but also one that when reappropriated clears space for thinking about Blackness beyond gender and thus in relation to what amounts to an alternative humanist project. As she observes, once we recognize the "play of paradox" (80) that attends the ungendering of the enslaved and her descendants, it becomes "our task to make a place for this different social subject" (80), for a subject who shaped by this violent history.

In the retrospective exchange about "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" just discussed, Spillers explains that in writing her article she was "not talking about a thing that is somehow male *and* female" but rather about "a kind of humanity that we seem very far from" but that she nonetheless "used to think black culture was on the verge of creating" (304). Despite her retrospective expression of her reservations about the her prophesied realization of a new kind of humanity that is hinted at by her use of the past tense ("used to think"), Spillers nonetheless recognizes that her watershed article ends on a final note that is optimistic and future orientated (and thus that chimes with Afro-futurist sensibilities). Indeed, in concluding "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" Spillers cosmically forecasts Black futurity in a new idiom, one that is able to move beyond—even as it renegotiates—existing relationships among reproduction, motherhood, gender and processes of racialization.

Drawing out this final cosmic note, Spillers surmises that "the African American male" has been "handed by the female" in ways he cannot escape and that have removed him from "the fiction of the father," the paternal position of power that is reserved within the dominant culture for white men (80). In order to grab hold of his "personhood," Spillers observes, the African American male "must regain" the "heritage of the mother" by saying "'yes' to the 'female' within" (80). As others have noted, with these words Spillers urges "the African American male's" embrace of a relationship to processes of ungendering handed down through

time by the captive female who was refused gender in Middle Passage and who was refused recognition as a mother in slavery, even as she has subsequently been misnamed “matriarch.” For Black women descended from the captive female who was forced to reproduce her own kinlessness and her dispossession as mother, Spillers suggests that the radical gesture that is required in and for a more liberated future is related but distinct. As she briefly elaborates, Black women must reclaim “the monstrosity” foisted upon the captive female and her descendants so as to lay claim to the right to “name,” to self-make, and not only to deconstruct but also to reconstruct the “American grammar” with which Spillers found herself required to contend as she began a meditation that was written in what Christina Sharpe poetically calls “the wake of slavery.”²⁹

In an uncanny convergence, the aforementioned foremother of the movement for reproductive justice, Loretta Ross, suggests that parallel moves ought to be made in its pursuit. In an article instructively entitled “Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism,” Ross observes that reproductive justice as a conceptual framework and movement praxis can and should encompass analysis of the experiences and the needs of people who are not gendered female.³⁰ She specifies that she is thinking about what it means to include in the call for reproductive justice the human rights of trans and gender non-conforming people—those who refuse existing gender formations or live them differently. In short, Ross suggests that the reproductive justice framework ought to be capacious enough to risk ungendering the intersection, unhinging femaleness from reproduction, and moving beyond gendered accounts of “motherhood” in ways that are related to but are at once distinct from those that Spillers first examined.

Although the bulk of Ross’s article is cast as an argument for advancing *women’s* reproductive freedom, in my reading of it, the intersectionality that Ross celebrates can also be understood to encompass the “the wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility*” that Spillers first located in the negation of gender at the intersection with race in Middle Passage. And perhaps this is unsurprising. In its most radical moment—that in which it imagines reproduction beyond gender and treats reproductive justice as a politics that ought not to be exclusively addressed to those identified as “women”—Ross’s article does precisely what I have suggested too many contributions to the theory of intersectionality do not: it invokes Spillers! In so doing Ross simultaneously embraces and reappropriates ungendering as a technology of reproductive empowerment. As Ross notes, to work toward reproductive justice one must start from the Black body and from there create a praxis that redresses the wrongs done to this body. These wrongs include the uninvited ungendering of the Black body alongside a host of related violations: the Black body’s transformation into a laboratory for medical and eugenic experiments such as forced sterilization, cesarean section, and use of long-term contraceptives like Depo-Provera; the Black body’s incarceration during pregnancy and its shackling during childbirth; and, not least, the denial to the Black body of access to healthcare, housing, and childcare as well as all the other myriad material resources that are not only desired but in fact required by people who hope to become parents. In short, to achieve reproductive justice, Ross reminds us that we must theorize *with* intersectional feminists who take gender as given and center biological women’s reproductive freedom and also that we must follow Spillers in embracing “the wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility*” that inheres in recognizing the ungendered intersection as a condition of *possibility* both despite and because of the history of the Black reproductive body’s exploitation and dispossession. This is because the ungendering of the captive female that was inaugurated in Atlantic slavery may yet prove to be just fungible enough to open on to the reproduction of new ways of being in and of reproducing our world. Where an account of the ungendering of racialized reproduction will take us in our theory and praxis, and thus in our quest for a substantive and truly inclusive human freedom, comprises a heretofore unexplored horizon.

Notes

- 1 Sirma Bilge argues that intersectionality has been appropriated by white feminism in a “post-black feminist makeover” that is especially prevalent in European feminist scholarship on global human rights. She suggests that an Afropessimist understanding of ontological anti-Blackness can be used to explain the removal of Black feminists from their theoretical innovation. Here, I take as given the Black feminist origination and development of intersectionality and thus contribute to the “defensive front” for which Bilge calls. See Sirma Bilge, “The Fungibility of Intersectionality: An Afropessimist Reading,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 13 (2020): 2298–326. Jennifer C. Nash provides a compelling argument for Black feminist surrender of proprietary claims to intersectionality. Although Bilge constructs her argument in opposition to Nash’s, there are situations in which their positions must, by practical necessity, be reconciled. Such reconciliation is required in pursuit of multiracial coalitional projects such as reproductive justice, especially in the face of the Supreme Court’s decimation of Roe. See Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined after Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). Jasbir Puar argues that an account of intersectionality that centers Black feminism leaves out feminist contributions by other women of color, an argument with which I agree. See *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 2 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Anti-Racist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139–67; and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
- 3 Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Polity Press, 2020), quote page 73. The use of the term “straight” is perhaps unintentionally instructive since inattention to homophobia, transphobia, and non-binary gender has been a problem within some intersectional scholarship.
- 4 Those invested in the construction of a specifically Black feminist genealogy of intersectionality reach into the nineteenth century to situate Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, and Maria Stewart as proto-intersectional theorists. See Collins and Bilge (2020); Ange-Marie Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Vivian May, “Intellectual Genealogies, Intersectionality, and Anna Julia Cooper,” in *Feminist Solidarity at the Cross-Roads: Intersectional Women’s Studies for Transracial Alliance*, ed. Kim Marie Vaz and Gary Lemons (New York: Routledge, 2021), 59–71.
- 5 Influential and otherwise compendious accounts of the origins and history of intersectionality leave out Hortense Spillers even as they center Black feminist contributions made before and after Crenshaw and Collins. See Collins and Bilge (2020), especially chapter 3; Hancock (2016); Anna Carastathis, *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016); and Vivian May, *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries* (New York: Routledge, 2015), among others. Notably, Nash (2019) is one of the few theorists of intersectionality who treats Spillers.
- 6 Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81. Hereafter all citations will be made parenthetically in the text.
- 7 Jasbir Puar’s critique of intersectionality is in part based on its presumption of gender as a primary and stable identity and analytic category. Puar proposes the concept metaphor, “assemblage,” by way of alternative, suggesting that it affords focus on *process* rather than given and stable identities. To an extent, Spillers’s critique of intersectionality, as I interpret it here, resonates with that offered by Puar several decades later. Notably, Puar centers poststructuralists such as Donna Haraway and Gilles Deleuze rather than Spillers. See Jabir K. Puar, “‘I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess’: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” *PhiloSOPHIA* 2, no. 1 (2012): 49–66 and *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 8 Alys Eve Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism’s Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
- 9 Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).
- 10 Ross and Solinger (2017), Collins and Birge (2020), and Loretta J. Ross, “Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism,” *Souls* 19, no. 3 (July–September 2017): 286–314. I return to Ross’s article in closing.
- 11 I include my prior work on race and reproduction within this critique in so far as I treat reproduction as a process this is gendered female. See Alys Eve Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions: Race, Gender and*

- Nationalism in Transatlantic Modern Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) and Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery* (2019).
- 12 See for example, Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) and “Partus Sequitur Ventrem: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery,” *Small Axe* 22, no. 1 (March 2018): 1–17; Sasha Turner, *Contested Bodies: Pregnancy, Childrearing, and Slavery in Jamaica* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); and Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: The Value of the Enslaved, from Womb to Grave, in the Building of a Nation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2017), especially chapter 1.
 - 13 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
 - 14 In making this claim my intent is not to overlook rape in slavery, but rather to recognize that rape was enfolded within reproduction when sexual violence resulted in “increase” in property. As Saidiya Hartman argues, rape in slavery targeted and terrorized enslaved women even as the law refused to recognize them as mothers or rights bearing subjects. As Hartman explains, rape was deemed a legitimate use of property; in slavery, the only legally recognizable crime was impingement on the enslavers’s treatment of chattel. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), especially chapter 3. Also see Angela Y. Davis, “Reflections on Black Women’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” *Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (1971): 2–15; and essays collected in Diana Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris, *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas* (Athens, OH: University of Georgia Press, 2018), among others.
 - 15 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1952), 540–588.
 - 16 On the figure of “the mammy” see Deborah Gray White’s foundational study, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985).
 - 17 See Morgan, *Laboring Women* (2004). Today Black patient’s reports of physical pain are consistently minimized or ignored, and pain medication inadequately prescribed or altogether denied to those in labor. This is another example of the afterlife of slavery. See Dana-Ain Davis, *Reproductive Injustice: Racism, Pregnancy, and Premature Birth* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).
 - 18 On the abstracting calculations of enslavers see Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) and Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
 - 19 With this formulation I seek to highlight Spillers’s prescient recognition of the African captive female as an Indigenous person dispossessed, and to suggest, more broadly, that Spillers lay the ground work for theorization of relationships among slavery, colonialism, and settler colonialism in contemporary work and thus for emergent concept metaphors such as “shoaling.” See Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formation of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
 - 20 Notably Spillers places “Middle Passage” in quotation marks. I understand this to indicate not only the less common use of the term in the 1980s but also Spillers’s assessment that so-called Middle Passage was not a circumscribed place, space, or event but rather a place holder for an epistemological and ontological process that was ongoing. I remove the quotation marks throughout this essay not to reify the Middle Passage as place, space, or event but rather in acknowledgment of the term’s now quotidian usage.
 - 21 Frank Wilderson offers a related formulation when he writes, “Africans [went] into the ships and [came] out as Blacks.” Unlike Spillers, Wilderson subsumes the process of ungendering within the process of Black dehumanization and thus does not track (un)gendering as a process that is conjoined with the production of Blackness. See Frank Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 38. Instructively, Spillers resists assimilation of her work into the Afropessimist camp in a lecture at the New School’s Institute for Critical Inquiry (June 9, 2021): <https://vimeo.com/551629648>.
 - 22 See Cedric Robins, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Elsewhere I argue for inclusion of Black feminist theorists within the Black radical tradition and for consideration of Spillers as a theorist of so-called primitive accumulation. See Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery* (2019), and “Hortense Spillers and the Reproduction of Racial Capitalism,” forthcoming issue of *History of the Present* (2024).
 - 23 Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelly Eversley and Jennifer L. Morgan, “‘Whatcha Gonna Do?’: Revisiting ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’: A

- Conversation with Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelly Eversley and Jennifer L. Morgan,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 1–2 (Spring–Summer, 2007): 299–309.
- 24 In this regard Spillers’s formulations resonate with Sylvia Wynter’s contemporaneous ideas about the production of the Human/Man and the limited scope of “humanity” within Western modernity. See Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s ‘Woman,’” in *Out of the Kumbula: Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990) and “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* (2003): 257–336.
- 25 C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
- 26 King, *The Black Shoals* (2019).
- 27 Tiffany Lethabo King, “Black ‘Feminisms’ and Pessimism: Abolishing Moynihan’s Negro Family,” *Theory and Event* 21, no. 1 (January 2018): 68–87, quote page 79.
- 28 Elsewhere I theorize this enduring racialized reproductive logic of enslavement as what I call “the slave episteme.” See Weinbaum, “Introduction: Human Reproduction and the Slave Episteme,” in *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery* (2019), 1–28.
- 29 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 30 Loretta J. Ross, “Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Activism” (2017); all further citations are made parenthetically.

5

TOOL OPTIMISM

A history of the 1979 *Second Sex* conference and the afterlives of Audre Lorde

Rachel Corbman

Forty-five minutes into the final session of the 1979 *Second Sex* conference, Audre Lorde approached the microphone to deliver what would become her most famous speech. One year earlier, in 1978, the conference organizers reached out to Lorde to serve as a respondent for a panel on “The Personal and the Political,” a keynote session that was scheduled to cap a three-day conference assessing the intellectual legacy of Simone de Beauvoir on the 30th anniversary of the publication of *The Second Sex*. It is not surprising that the organizers invited Lorde, who was, in the words of Lorde’s biographer Alexis De Veaux, “pretty much” Black feminism’s “It Girl” at the time: a well-known poet with ties to the Black Arts Movement who, after coming out as a lesbian, quickly secured her place as a popular speaker on the feminist, lesbian, and gay conference circuit.¹ “Can you all hear me?” Lorde asked the crowd at the beginning of her talk.²

In her remarks that followed, Lorde dispensed with the traditional pleasantries of her role as a commentator to instead call out the unmarked whiteness and straightness of many of the papers on the panel, particularly papers authored by Italian feminist Manuela Fraire and Jessica Benjamin, then a recent PhD in psychology who served as the conference’s coordinator. “It is a particular academic arrogance,” Lorde fumed, “to assume any discussion of feminist theory in this place and this time without examining our differences and without any active input on every level from poor women, from Black women, Third World Women, and from lesbians.”³

Though Lorde’s remarks perturbed some members of the organizing committee, especially Benjamin, many conference attendees and a wider feminist reading public enthusiastically embraced her speech. A few months after the conference, Lorde’s remarks appeared in print for the first time in the December 1979 issue of the widely read feminist newspaper *off our backs*, alongside a lengthy report on the conference. Later, a revised version—with the appended title “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”—was published in numerous field-defining anthologies, including *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) and Lorde’s own *Sister Outsider* (1984), helping to solidify “The Master’s Tools” as Lorde’s most frequently read and assigned essay. In this chapter, I draw from archival research and careful study of Lorde’s discursive afterlife in contemporary queer and feminist scholarship to offer a history of “The Master’s Tools” from its origin at the *Second Sex* conference to its canonization as a Black feminist ur-text. First, this chapter delves into the archival record of the conference—including recordings of the event preserved in the records of the New York Institute for the Humanities at NYU,

conference ephemera at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and correspondence in Audre Lorde's papers at Spelman College—in order to situate “The Master's Tools” in its historic context, offering a history in which Lorde moves on and off center stage. After reanimating the *Second Sex* conference, the final section of this chapter asks how the “selective and extreme canonization” of “The Master's Tools,” to quote Grace Kyungwon Hong, shapes not only how we remember Lorde but also how we understand feminist and queer field formation (2015, 74). Following Clare Hemmings's interest in the “stories we tell,” I argue that feminist and queer scholars routinely use Lorde as a figure to narrate feminism's transformation from a white to an intersectional project, a story that too easily buttresses the present from a repudiated white past. In returning to the conference, I demonstrate how this narrative flattens our understanding of Lorde's contributions, while vastly oversimplifying feminism's fraught history with race before and after the field's supposed turning point in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

1.1 Sitting around the table with (white) women

In 1978, Jessica Benjamin defended her dissertation on “Internalization and Instrumental Culture: A Reinterpretation of Psychoanalysis and Social Theory” in the psychology program at New York University and began a fellowship at the newly formed New York Institute for the Humanities, which was founded one year earlier by Benjamin's dissertation advisor Richard Sennet. From the moment she started her fellowship, Benjamin resolved to plan a conference that marked the anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which was published in France as *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949.⁴ Benjamin's enthusiasm partially stemmed from her own intellectual encounter with *The Second Sex*, which she first read in 1967 with her women's group as an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.⁵ *The Second Sex*, she mused later, appeared to her then like it had “always been there,” “waiting to be discovered by us.”⁶ On one level, then, the conference celebrated *The Second Sex* as a singular text, which the call for papers boldly claimed as “the single most seminal work in feminist theory.”⁷ More broadly, however, the conference aimed to chart “where feminist thought [had] traveled” since the publication of *The Second Sex*, with particular attention to feminist theories developed out of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s, including but not limited to work undertaken within the movement's academic arm of women's studies.⁸

To put together an intellectually promiscuous conference, the organizers capaciously defined “theory” as a “rethinking of the world” rather than a necessarily academic mode of knowledge production.⁹ In doing so, they attempted to reconcile a perceived division “between theorists and activists, academy and the community” that first took hold in the early 1970s and intensified as women's studies accrued institutional status in the US academy (Benjamin 2000, 288). However, despite their efforts, everyone on the organizing committee “spent a considerable portion of [their] lives in academic environments,”¹⁰ and thus tended—individually and collectively—to be interpolated on the academic side of this imagined binary, even as many of the organizers did not secure traditional academic jobs during the “overwhelming job crisis” of the 1970s.¹¹ Specifically, Benjamin invited six women to serve as the program committee. Of them, Sara Ruddick, Muriel Dimen, and Kate Ellis held tenured positions at the New School for Social Research, Lehman College, and Rutgers University, while the remainder occupied significantly more precarious positions. A doctoral candidate, Serafina Bathrick, taught courses at Hunter College while finishing her dissertation at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. After earning a PhD, Carol Ascher worked part-time as the co-coordinator of a women's studies program before quitting her job to focus on her writing in 1979. Finally, Harriet Cohen earned an MA in the short-lived Department of City Planning at Yale University. After graduating, she

accumulated feminist fame as a guitarist of the New Haven Women's Liberation Rock Band and a community housing and reproductive justice activist in Connecticut and New York. Despite not being an academic, Cohen circulated in the same feminist circles as many of the planners. Like Cohen, Benjamin lived in New Haven in the early 1970s, where both were involved with New Haven Women's Liberation. Likewise, after moving to New York, Cohen helped found the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA) with Dimen. Cohen and Dimen also co-authored CARASA's statement of unity together.

Despite divergent career trajectories, the organizers understood themselves as an essentially homogeneous group. As well as sharing an intellectual and political milieu, they were all white, mostly straight, and struggled "to break out of a middle class orientation"—a major source of anxiety during the planning process, as they tried and to a large extent failed to plan a conference that placed "different parts of the feminist community" in conversation.¹² In a gesture of inclusivity, the organizers disseminated a call for papers in popular movement periodicals—including *New Directions for Women*, *Sojourner*, *What She Wants*, *New Women's Times*, and *off our backs*—inviting readers to submit abstracts on what they believed "to be the central theoretical question for feminists today."¹³ They also extended invitations to plug gaps that they noticed in the program, carefully reaching out to women who were imagined to be ideologically at odds with the organizing committee. Specifically, many organizers shared an apathy toward cultural feminism, an amorphous term that the historian Alice Echols defined as a feminist desire to create a "female counter culture" untouched by patriarchy (1984, 51). Despite their critiques of cultural feminism, the organizers extended invitations to numerous feminists associated with this tendency, including Charlotte Bunch, who was a former member of the lesbian separatist collective the Furies, and the radical theologian Mary Daly, fresh off the publication of *Gyn/ Ecology* (1978).

The committee was less successful in attracting women of color. Early in the planning process, they reached out to at least three Black feminists, including Lorde. According to Benjamin, the literary critic Mary Helen Washington refused out of the concern that she would be speaking "to an audience of only white women" (2000, 286). In high demand after the publication of *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman*, Michele Wallace also declined the invitation. The planning committee struggled to come up with additional names. As the date grew closer, Ascher recalled the growing desperation that she felt, "sitting around the table with all the (white) women planning the de Beauvoir conference. We haven't got the black women we need to participate. We haven't gotten them, can't find them, no one has come up with them."¹⁴ Finally, Ascher reluctantly suggested her friend Bonnie Johnson, a Black feminist historian who recently finished an MA in women's history from Sarah Lawrence College. "Everyone was relieved," Ascher added, noting that she "won points" from the planning committee for having "a Black friend."¹⁵

Johnson accepted Ascher's invitation to participate in a keynote panel on "The Personal and the Political." As a last-minute addition to the program, Johnson did not write a formal essay for inclusion in the packet of pre-circulated papers, which was sent to attendees before the conference. Instead, Johnson agreed to participate in a dialogue on Black feminism with her friends Ascher and Camille Bristow over a "half gallon of wine."¹⁶ Ascher, then, typed up this conversation and included it with the pre-circulated papers.¹⁷ Though Johnson and Bristow did the bulk of the talking, the above-quoted account of Ascher's experience on the planning committee is drawn from this piece, purposefully marking "the contradiction" and "painful truth ... behind this very paper."¹⁸ In addition to Ascher's self-reflexive account of her experience on the conference committee, the organizers also acknowledged their failure to attract women of color in their co-authored introduction to the pre-circulated papers. "We learned in the process of try-

ing to draw in [women of color],” they wrote, “how problematic it was that we hadn’t included such women in the planning process itself.”¹⁹ Ironically, then, Lorde’s well-known critique of the conference was first leveled by the organizers themselves.

1.2 Black feminist interventions

Harbingers of trouble to come followed the pre-circulated papers, as they made their way to registered attendees across the United States and Europe. “When I got [that] thing ... in the mail,” a conference attendee snapped, “I said ‘blech.’ If you have that much consciousness [to say] ‘we’re all middle class and we’re all white’ ... then you knew to not make it that way.”²⁰ Similarly, after receiving her copy of the pre-circulated papers, the Black feminist writer Susan McHenry was “alarmed” to see “precious few women of color” among the “panelists, presenters, and commentators,” as well as the scant attention paid to “the question of difference in terms of both race and sex” in the papers by white American and European feminists.²¹ McHenry soon emerged as one of the most vocal critics of the conference. In the weeks leading up to the event, she consulted with her friends and colleagues, including the members of her Black feminist study group and Robin Morgan, with whom she worked at *Ms.* magazine. She also reached out to Lorde. After these conversations, McHenry delivered a letter to the organizers ten days before the conference, which included a list of Black women “she wished to see invited to the conference” (Benjamin 2000, 287). Despite an expressed interest in diversifying the conference, the organizers balked at McHenry’s “series of demands” so late in the planning process (287). However, even as McHenry’s letter failed to compel the organizers to change the schedule, it set the stage for a series of Black feminist interventions at the conference.

On September 27, 1979, reporters from numerous feminist newspapers—including *Sojourner* in Cambridge, *New Directions for Women* in New Jersey, *off our backs* in Washington DC, and *The Lesbian Tide* in Los Angeles—descended on New York University to cover the *Second Sex* conference. From the beginning, Barbara Macdonald and Cynthia Rich wrote for *Sojourner*, “it was evident that the conference was in trouble” as they mingled among a crowd of “mostly middle class white women” with their eyes trained on a “panel of seven white women” on the stage (1979, 8). “Once again,” they wrote, “the process by which our theories are made was going to have to be examined as attentively as the product,” evidencing how routine critiques of the whiteness of feminism felt by 1979—something we must interrogate *once again* (1979). Macdonald and Rich might, for example, have recalled Black feminist literary critic Barbara Smith’s speech at the first National Women’s Studies Association conference five months earlier at the University of Kansas. Invited to give a short talk on Black women’s studies at the conference’s concluding plenary on “Visions and Revisions: Women and the Power of Change,” Smith instead decided to focus her remarks on racism in women’s studies and the feminist movement more generally. “‘Oh no,’ I can hear some of you inwardly grumble,” she quipped at the beginning of her talk, “Not [racism] again. That’s all we’ve been talking about since we got here” (1982, 48). Quickly published as “Racism and Women’s Studies” in *Women’s Studies Newsletter* (1979), *Frontiers* (1980), and *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982), Smith’s speech documents a growing frustration with the demography of women’s studies, the tokenization of a small number of highly visible feminists of color, and the need to continuously repeat a critique that was already well-known to all feminists, including not only feminists of color or antiracist white lesbian feminists like Macdonald and Rich but also the inwardly groaning white feminists conjured by Smith. The *Second Sex* conference was primed to be the site of yet another critique.

Though “The Master’s Tools” looms large in our critical imagination, the contemporaneous coverage of the conference arguably dedicates more space to McHenry’s unscheduled remarks during the “Women and Culture: Her Silence, Her Voice” panel on the first night. Macdonald and Rich, for example, open their review with a detailed account of McHenry’s speech, while Lorde merits only passing mention twice in the article (1979, 8, 30). According to McHenry, Robin Morgan was responsible for getting her “on that stage.”²² During the dinner break before the panel, Morgan approached the organizers with an ultimatum. She would not act as a moderator unless McHenry was permitted to speak. A tense and extended exchange followed, which delayed the start of the 7:00 pm panel until 7:30. Morgan persisted and eventually the organizers relented. In her introduction to the panel, an animated Morgan—“riled” from her fight with “six or seven” organizers²³—asked the audience to “look around the room” and notice “the domination” of white women alongside the “tragic relative absence of Black and brown and Third World women.”²⁴ It is “unforgivable,” she told the crowd, to define feminist theory as a “Euro-American white tradition,” extending from de Beauvoir.²⁵ For the organizers and many audience members, Morgan’s behavior aligned with her reputation as a provocateur. A controversial figure, Morgan was best known for her caustic critiques of the New Left, exemplified by her 1970 manifesto “Goodbye to All That,” and her vicious attack against Beth Elliot, a trans lesbian folk singer, at the 1973 Lesbian Conference. Barely concealing her contempt, Carol Ann Douglas noted Morgan’s “definite ‘you white feminists’ instead of a ‘we white feminists’ tone” in her coverage of the event (1979, 5).

Following her remarks, Morgan introduced McHenry, as a “distinguished Black feminist theorist” and “one of the editors at *Ms.*,” and pleaded with the audience to listen to her.²⁶ McHenry approached the podium in tears. However, rather than offering a targeted critique of the conference, McHenry gave a measured talk on the methodological challenges of writing theory that attends to “the condition of *all women.*”²⁷ Starting from the axiom that gender and race are the socially constructed effects of a “15,000-year-old obsession with distributing power and wealth hierarchically,” McHenry argued that feminists must find ways to engage with race and gender without reinscribing binaries between men and women, gay and straight, or Black and white.²⁸ To illustrate the difficulties of doing so, McHenry offered examples from her experience reading *The Second Sex* with her Black feminist study group, which included Barbara Omolade and Michele Wallace. Though aspects of de Beauvoir’s argument resonated with McHenry’s experience “as a Black American female who was raised in a middle-class home in the South in the sixties and came of age in various intellectual and activist communities in the Northeast in the seventies,” McHenry and her reading group resented de Beauvoir’s tendency to analogize the situation of people of color as a group to women as a group, a tendency that they also found in “most other white feminist theory [they] read.”²⁹ For McHenry, however, marginalized women could not simply be added to existing theories, an approach that underestimated the “problem with the documentation” of marginalized historical actors, who tend to make only fleeting appearances in archives that are structured by people in power.³⁰ Thus, rather than taking an additive approach, these challenges necessitated a “new mode of philosophical discourse.”³¹ Resonating with what Saidiya Hartman would later term critical fabulation, McHenry suggested fiction as one space where ideas about race, gender, and sexuality could be “imaginatively conceived.”³² Feminism, she argued, could also borrow strategies from the Black musical form of call-and-response. “I’ll sit down now,” she told the audience in closing, “and sing the refrain, while some other woman picks up the lead.”³³

During the reception that followed, numerous audience members approached McHenry to thank her for her speech. Though well received, McHenry had two critics. First, Bristow—one of the three Black women on the program—passed a note to McHenry “right after [she] fin-

ished speaking,” which asked why McHenry had not spoken to her before addressing the conference.³⁴ Specifically, Bristow resented McHenry’s brief mention of her dialogue with Johnson and Ascher, a paper that McHenry described as an insightful meditation on “our problems as feminists trying to appreciate our racial differences,” even as its “token status” inadvertently positioned it as a stand-in for the “full extent and range of contributions to feminist theory by women of color.”³⁵ Later, after they had a chance to speak, Bristow also raised concerns about McHenry’s failure to directly interrogate “the tensions between heterosexual and lesbian women” as a significant structuring binary.³⁶ “She was very right,” McHenry admitted later, eventually deciding to omit her critique of Bristow and Johnson’s paper in the version of her remarks published in *Sojourner*.³⁷ Bristow, in turn, invited McHenry to join her on the stage for “The Personal and the Political” panel. More devastatingly, Benjamin dismissed McHenry’s talk as a diatribe against “the entire conference” as a “racist gathering”—a telling failure to hear McHenry’s nuanced argument (2000, 287).

Two days later, McHenry indeed joined Bristow and Johnson on stage for the conference’s closing session on “The Personal and the Political.” As organized, this panel offered an opportunity to discuss pre-circulated papers, including Bristow and Johnson’s dialogue with Ascher and more traditional papers authored by the historian Linda Gordon, Italian feminist Manuela Fraire, and Benjamin herself. Rather than reading their papers, each panelist was invited to give “a statement summarizing their paper.”³⁸ Following this, the commentators, including Lorde, were tasked with responding to the papers, before opening the floor to conversation. The panel proceeded uneventfully until Lorde’s remarks. Gordon, Benjamin, and Fraire summarized their papers, while Bristow and Johnson kept their remarks “very short.” “We can’t really do a summary of our paper since it was a conversation,” Johnson explained.³⁹ Likewise, in keeping with the generic conventions of a respondent, the feminist journalist Barbara Ehrenrich aimed to “bring out some common themes” across the papers.⁴⁰ Unlike “most of the other papers that have been delivered” at the conference, Ehrenrich argued that the papers on “The Personal and the Political” panel successfully “confront[ed] the differences between women by race and by class,” speaking “not just of woman but of *women*.”⁴¹ Lorde’s response, of course, famously countered this conclusion.

Pulling no punches, Lorde opened her remarks by calling out Fraire’s use of the phrase “the black beast of dependency,” an awkward attempt to translate an Italian turn of phrase into English. Lorde contended that Fraire’s racially loaded metaphor risked alienating women of color and thus exemplified “the destructive aspect of not attending to what difference means.”⁴² After her impromptu response to Fraire, Lorde read a prepared statement, which closely resembled the version published in *off our backs* as “The Role of Difference” and more loosely approximated the more well-known “The Master’s Tools.” Like “The Master’s Tools,” Lorde’s remarks at the conference lodged concerns about the field through an ostensibly narrow critique of “The Personal and the Political” panel. Readers of “The Master’s Tools” will also recognize Lorde’s shift between righteous anger at feminist manifestations of racism, heterosexism, and classism, and a more utopian vision of a feminist future in which differences can be cherished as “necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.”⁴³ Her original presentation, however, differed from “The Master’s Tools” in the degree to which she engaged with particular conference papers. Specifically, Lorde’s remarks at the *Second Sex* conference scrutinized Benjamin’s “Starting from the Left and Going Beyond,” a paper that, in short, analyzed how gendered ideas about revolution present a unique predicament for feminism. In her reading, Lorde rejected Benjamin’s call for a “form of transcendence which does not repudiate immanence” as overly invested in individual subjectivity, thus foreclosing an analysis of the “interdependency between women.”⁴⁴ Lorde also targeted Benjamin’s concluding point that

feminists must cultivate a “tolerance for difference in which freedom can grow.”⁴⁵ Tolerance, Lorde bristled, “is the greatest kind of reformism, for this is the very denial of the creative function of difference.”⁴⁶ Similarly, Lorde read Fraire’s paper “How the Mother/Daughter Relationship Influences the Method of Women’s Liberation” as relying on “an either/or model of nurturing ... that totally dismissed my knowledge as a Black lesbian.”⁴⁷

Lorde’s remarks disturbed Fraire and Benjamin. At the beginning of the question-and-answer session, Fraire apologized to Lorde for her pejorative use of the term “black,” which she argued did not “contain the tensions [in Italy] which it contains here.”⁴⁸ But Fraire, then, quickly added that Lorde’s presentation dismissed *her* experience of harassment and suffering as a white woman in Italy. Likewise, though she held her tongue at the conference, Benjamin later sent Lorde a letter, explaining how “enormously painful” Lorde’s speech was for her and the conference committee.⁴⁹ Still fuming 20 years after the conference and nearly a decade after Lorde’s death, Benjamin published an open letter in 2000, which dismissed Lorde’s paper as somewhere in between “an inflammatory diatribe” and a “serious argument” (289). Fraire and Benjamin aside, most attendees warmly greeted Lorde’s remarks, spontaneously breaking into six extended applause breaks, even after Lorde attempted to quell the audience’s reactions by asking, after an enthusiastic wave of applause, that the audience please try to listen to “the things that I am trying to share with you.”⁵⁰ Benjamin’s account similarly emphasized that Lorde “was not speaking to an audience who disagreed with her,” as evidenced also by the parade of conference goers who voiced their support of Lorde and anger at the conference during the question-and-answer session (287). In a particularly ironic twist, Lorde’s defenders included Stacy Pies. Two years later, Pies served as the coordinator of the contentious 1981 National Women’s Studies Association conference on Women Respond to Racism, where Lorde would give a keynote that—yet again—issued an indictment of the conference’s failure to respond to racism despite its name.

1.3 Lorde as a fantasy figure

The archive of the *Second Sex* conference offers insight into a set of collective anxieties over the whiteness, straightness, and academization of women’s studies at the end of the 1970s. This messy history, however, is often reduced to a simpler story of how feminists of color transformed the field from a white to an intersectional project, literally, as Jennifer Nash puts it, “whip[ping] the field into shape with their demands for a feminism that accounts for race” (2019, 13). As early as 1987, feminist film theorist Teresa De Lauretis, for example, heralded the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) as a turning point in which the “feelings, the analyses, and the political positions of feminists of color, and their critiques of white or mainstream feminism” were “first made available to all feminists” (10). Decades later, historian Nan Alamilla Boyd and queer theorist Jack Halberstam similarly point to the interventions of women of color—including Lorde—alongside “a postmodern or deconstructive turn in the humanities and social sciences” (Boyd 2005, 99) as the two catalysts that transformed women’s studies from “weepy white lady feminism” into “multiracial, poststructuralist, intersectional feminism” (Halberstam 2014). In this final section, I consider how this familiar story limits our understanding of Lorde as a historical figure while distorting feminism’s past and present.

In casting Lorde in the starring role of the story of how feminism became intersectional, she appears strangely out of time, an outsider in an otherwise monolithically or essentially white feminist past from which she is rescued by contemporary queer and feminist scholars. In other words, Lorde becomes what Sara Ahmed might call a fantasy figure, whose overdetermined role as an agent of feminist change erases more than it elucidates.⁵¹ To clarify, I am not denying that Lorde often assumed a “persona of an outsider,” as De Veaux clearly establishes in her biography

of Lorde (2004, 247). However, Lorde's outsider persona does not mean that Lorde took aim at the same targets that contemporary critics sometimes point her towards. Lorde's investment in lesbian feminism is one example of the cleavage between Lorde as a historical figure and contemporary critical desires. Since the late 1980s, feminist and queer critics have tended to imagine lesbian feminism as a relic of the white past that the intersectional turn supposedly left behind. For example, Linda Martín Alcoff's canonical essay "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory" (1988) drew a firm distinction between the cultural feminism of white lesbians like Daly and Adrienne Rich and "feminist writings from women of oppressed nationalities and races," including Lorde, who in Alcoff's view "consistently rejected essentialist conceptions of gender" (411). In 2000, the queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman diagnosed a similar dismissal of (white) lesbian feminism in queer studies. Lesbian feminism, she explained, is routinely cast as a "big drag" for queer studies with its un-queer attachments to "essentialized bodies, normative visions of women's sexuality, and single-issue identity politics" (728).

Because "women of color feminism" and "lesbian feminism" are imagined as discrete and perhaps diametrically opposed categories, contemporary critical engagements with Lorde often fail to interrogate the key role of lesbian feminist communities in shaping her thinking, even as Lorde so clearly identified as a lesbian feminist. To give one particularly lesbianic example, in 1972, Lorde began to see Bernice Goodman, a Jewish lesbian feminist psychotherapist who founded the Institute for Human Identity in New York. In keeping with egalitarian feminist ideals, Goodman eschewed the idea that therapists ought to maintain professional boundaries with their clients. The therapist, she argued, "should try when possible to support her clients outside of the therapy sessions," including "attending key family functions; performances; participating together in meetings and conferences, and, in some instances, friendships" (1977, 36). Sure enough, in 1976, Goodman started a writing group with three lesbian couples, all of whom also saw her as a therapist: Lorde and her partner Frances Clayton, Blanche Cook and Clare Coss, and Adrienne Rich and Michelle Cliff. Out of the conversations with her writing group, Goodman published a slim volume, titled *The Lesbian: A Celebration of Difference*, in 1977 with Out & Out Books, a lesbian feminist press founded by Joan Larkin, who was, not surprisingly, also Goodman's client. Notably for us, Lorde endorsed Goodman's book with a blurb that describes Goodman's approach to difference as moving beyond "the toleration of difference" to instead celebrate "non-destructive differences as an exciting force for change," directly anticipating the language that she would use in her response at the *Second Sex* conference two years later. How did Lorde and her writing group of primarily white lesbian feminists discuss differences together in the years leading up to the *Second Sex* conference and how did these conversations inform Goodman and Lorde's published work on the subject? Though feminist and queer scholars frequently namedrop Lorde to explain feminist history, this citational archive offers little to answer this question, or for that matter the broader question of how lesbian feminism inflected Lorde's prescient thinking on race, gender, feelings, bodies, sex, and history.⁵²

As well as reducing historical complexity, the idea that feminism became intersectional in the late 1970s and 1980s too easily places white feminism in the past, thwarting our ability to analyze present-day manifestations of racism that Lorde critiqued at the *Second Sex* conference. I am not alone in raising this concern. In a reflection on her experience teaching *Sister Outsider*, the philosopher Amber Katherine noted the "vacuous speed" with which her students aligned themselves with Lorde and, by extension, "on the other side of racism" (267). Similarly, in an essay published one year after Lorde's death, the Black feminist literary critic Sharon P. Holland described her discomfort witnessing a tribute to Lorde at the 1993 Gay and Lesbian March on Washington. Standing among at least a million other queer people, Holland watched a video

commemorating Lorde, who died at the age of 58 in 1992. Hearing Lorde speak for the first time, Holland burst into tears, which ran “hot and angry on the lawn” as she “wondered if any of the folk around [her] were really hearing what Lorde had to say” (168). Ironically, but significantly, Katherine and Holland describe experiences that resonate across time with the original context of the *Second Sex* conference, where a crowd of primarily white feminists cheered on Lorde as she attempted to call out white feminist racism—an object lesson for the feminist present, forgotten in the ascendancy of “The Master’s Tools” as canon. To paraphrase Lorde at the *Second Sex* conference and Holland at the March on Washington, can we hear her *now*?

Notes

- 1 De Veaux was interviewed in the “1970s: The Vanguard of Struggle” episode of FX’s miniseries *Pride* (2020), directed by Cheryl Dunye.
- 2 “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tapes II–II,” 1979, The New York Institute for the Humanities (R.G.37.4) Box 70, Folder 10, New York University, New York, NY.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tapes I–IV,” 1979, The New York Institute for the Humanities (R.G.37.4) Box 70, Folder 7, New York University, New York, NY.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Call for papers, *Second Sex* conference, Conference Files, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY.
- 8 “Introduction” to pre-circulated papers, *Second Sex* conference, Conference Files, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Sandy Cooper, “Women and the Historical Profession: Looking Ahead” report, November 1974, Berkshire Conference of Women Historians (MC 606), Box 15, Folder 3, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA.
- 12 “Introduction” to pre-circulated papers.
- 13 See for example “What’s Happening,” *What She Wants* 6 No. 9 (February 1979): 16.
- 14 Camille Bristow and Bonnie Johnson’s “Both and And,” pre-circulated papers, *Second Sex* conference, Conference Files, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 The time constraint might not be the only explanation. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, published dialogues were a popular form for Black feminists, including “Face to Face, Day to Day Racism CR” (1979), “Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue” (1981), and “Conversations and Questions: Black Women on Black Women Writers” (1983).
- 18 Camille Bristow and Bonnie Johnson’s “Both and And.”
- 19 “Introduction” to pre-circulated papers.
- 20 “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tapes 2–5, E4” The New York Institute for the Humanities (R.G.37.4) Box 71, Folder 4, New York University, New York, NY.
- 21 “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tape 1: Culture (Thursday Night),” The New York Institute for the Humanities (R.G.37.4) Box 71, Folder 6, New York University, New York, NY.
- 22 “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tapes II–III,” The New York Institute for the Humanities (R.G.37.4) Box 70, Folder 12, New York University, New York, NY.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tape 1: Culture (Thursday Night).”
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.

- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tapes II–III.”
- 35 “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tape 1: Culture (Thursday Night).”
- 36 “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tapes II–III,”
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tape 1,” The New York Institute for the Humanities (R.G.37.4) Box 70, Folder 1, New York University, New York, NY.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tapes II–II.”
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Jessica Benjamin’s “Starting from the Left and Going Beyond,” pre-circulated papers, *Second Sex* conference, Conference Files, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY; “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tapes II–II.”
- 45 Jessica Benjamin “Starting from the Left and Going Beyond.”
- 46 “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tapes II–II.”
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Letter from Jessica Benjamin to Audre Lorde, October 23, 1979, Audre Lorde papers, Box 10, Folder 1.2.122, Spelman College Archives.
- 50 “The Second Sex, Thirty Years Later: Tapes II–II.”
- 51 Ahmed uses the term “fantasy figure” to describe the figures of the happy housewife “that erases the signs of labor under the sign of happiness” (50) and the angry Black women, whose “thoughtful arguments are dismissed as anger” (68).
- 52 Amber Musser, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and SaraEllen Strongman are significant exceptions to this general trend.

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Tool optimism

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6

BLACK FEMINISM AND THE VIOLENCE OF THE WORD

James Bliss

6.1 Anoriginary Blackness

The time of slavery is now and the project of freedom remains not only incomplete, but also, in important respects, unbegun.¹

Wherever else it might take us, Black feminism takes us to the relation between meaning and violence. The present chapter re-imagines the conceptual life of “intersectionality” from the vantage of Crenshaw’s earliest major statement, “Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law.” This is before Crenshaw outlined the vexed status of Black women in antidiscrimination law—the question of how one makes a legal claim of discrimination when the discrimination one faces is based on neither race nor sex but, instead, both—in “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.” This is before she articulated how the same dynamics operated in the contexts of antiracist and feminist political organizing in “Mapping the Margins.” Crenshaw’s earlier essay hinges on the relation between Black liberation struggle and the indeterminacy of civil rights law. In the context of Crenshaw’s early thought, “intersectionality” names a set of attempts to reckon with the indeterminacy of Black liberation—or, in a word, abolition.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the reception of intersectionality, both critical and laudatory, is largely organized around anxieties over the subject position of the Black woman. There are both vocal supporters and vocal critics of the concept united by a desire to enclose a disconcerting openness internal to what I, following Crenshaw, called Black women’s “buried subjectivity.”² In that essay, I argued for a critical orientation toward intersectionality, and the larger project of Black feminist theorizing, that held space for openness. It sought the promise of openness as possibility and risked the perils of openness as vulnerability. In that piece, I also observed how “intersectional feminist” had supplanted earlier wave metaphors for naming the center of energy in contemporary feminism. Five years later, “intersectional” increasingly names a feminist mainstream, while “abolition feminism” marks the cutting edge.

The concept name “intersectionality” represented Crenshaw’s engagement with longer traditions of Black feminist theorizing around multiple and overlapping modes of domination, and Crenshaw has acted as a steward for that concept name over the past decades. “Abolition” in its contemporary use is less reducible to the work of a single author. One might outline a geneal-

ogy including but not limited to the works of prison abolitionists, among them Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Joy James, and Dylan Rodriguez, and the work of organizations like Critical Resistance and activist formations calling for the abolition of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.³ It also overlaps in significant ways with the movements collated under the heading of Black Lives Matter, and was briefly the watchword of global protests across the summer of 2020, as calls to “abolish the police” were domesticated into calls to “defund the police.” “Abolition” has also circulated to the side of (well-funded) non-profit criminal justice reform organizations, and the growing popularization of resistance to the United States’ status as what Loïc Wacquant calls the “the *first genuine prison society*” in world history.⁴ “Abolition,” in its present iteration, is a name for calls for the abolition of prisons and jails, the abolition of the bureaucracy of state violence (especially in the concrete form of law enforcement agencies), and the abolition of the conditions that produce prisons, police, and criminalized populations.

The Kimberlé Crenshaw of “Race, Reform, and Retrenchment” is not an abolitionist in the sense just outlined. Instead, her project circulates around the status of civil rights law, and, to a lesser extent, civil rights activism, across three locations: American jurisprudence, conservative legal scholarship, and the field of critical legal studies. Antidiscrimination law, she finds, is founded upon a fundamental ambiguity:

what at first appears an unambiguous commitment to antidiscrimination conceals within it many conflicting and contradictory interests. In antidiscrimination law, the conflicting interests actually reinforce existing social arrangements, moderated to the extent necessary to balance the civil rights challenge with the many interests still privileged over it.⁵

Within antidiscrimination law’s rhetoric of “equal opportunity,” the interests privileged over the civil rights challenge might, depending on the jurist, include the interests of whites in maintaining a political-social-cultural-economic system of racist domination. It is for that reason that the civil rights constituency (i.e., African Americans and others with some commitment to racial justice) cannot passively rely on the letter of the law to protect their interests. In Crenshaw’s words,

If the civil rights constituency allows its own political consciousness to be completely replaced by the ambiguous discourse of antidiscrimination law, it will be difficult for it to defend its genuine interests against those whose interests are supported by opposing visions that also lie within the same discourse. The struggle, it seems, is to maintain a contextualized, specified world view that reflects the experience of Blacks. The question remains whether engaging in legal reform precludes this possibility.⁶

Crenshaw establishes a distinction here between the “political consciousness” of the civil rights constituency and the “ambiguous discourse” of antidiscrimination law, and she warns against the former being displaced by the latter. Later in the text, Crenshaw also makes a historical argument about the relationship between antidiscrimination law and Black American political formations. The formal repudiation of symbolic oppression may have had profound impacts on the lives of Black Americans, but it also displaced structures against which Blacks had forged a collective identity. “Although ‘White Only’ signs may have been crude and debilitating,” she writes,

they at least presented a readily discernible target around which to organize. Now, the targets are obscure and diffuse, and this difference may create doubt among some

Blacks whether there is enough similarity between their life experiences and those of other Blacks to warrant collective political action.⁷

Crenshaw continues,

As Blacks moved into different spheres, the experience of being Black in America became fragmented and multifaceted, and the different contexts presented different opportunities to experience racism in different ways. The social, economic, and even residential distance between the various classes may complicate efforts to unite behind issues as a racial group.⁸

In this historical gloss, Black Americans *did possess* something like an unambiguous set of political desires that were fragmented in the wake of civil rights victories that made inroads against symbolic oppression while leaving material oppression—and the systems, structures, and institutions that reproduce material oppression—intact. Under these conditions, “the task at hand is to devise ways to wage ideological and political struggle while minimizing the costs of engaging in an inherently legitimating discourse.”⁹

The challenge, for Crenshaw, is to cultivate the sort of collective vision that had earlier been available to the civil rights constituency, only under the revised circumstances of the late 1980s. But what is the relationship between the ambiguity of civil rights law and the civil rights constituencies that advocate for those laws? Is the ambiguity of antidiscrimination law meant to thwart the desires called civil rights? Is the ambiguity of antidiscrimination law an effect of the ambiguity of all law? Is antidiscrimination law *uniquely* ambiguous, in the sense that law is generally literal, but antidiscrimination law is not? Or is antidiscrimination law uniquely *ambiguous*, in that law itself is ambiguous, but antidiscrimination law is ambiguous in a singular way? Are the political desires and demands of the civil rights constituency *unambiguous*? Is the ambiguity of antidiscrimination law an effect of the ambiguity of the desires called civil rights? Or are the desires called civil rights and the law of antidiscrimination each ambiguous in different ways? These are questions too large for any one research program to answer, but they shape not only Crenshaw’s early thought but the larger project of Black feminist theorizing.

But have the desires called the Black radical tradition ever been unambiguous? In “Race, Reform, and Retrenchment,” Crenshaw treats Blackness primarily as a social-political-legal category. A status one inhabits before the law, within a political order, in the everyday world of the social. In my previous work, I argued that there are moments in Crenshaw’s analysis that treat Blackness as what we might call, in more contemporary terms, a political-ontological category.¹⁰ Blackness operates at moments of her text as a genre of being that disrupts categorization itself. The two essays that articulate Crenshaw’s formative theorizations of intersectionality both reckon with the indeterminacy of a liberation struggle from this anoriginary non-position. They reveal the degree to which “a being at the intersection of Black and woman is not simply in a difficult place before the law—she is *nowhere at all*.”¹¹

At this moment in her work, Crenshaw treats ambiguity as external to the civil rights constituency, as something that infects and fragments that constituency, and thusly proposes a project of unlearning ambiguity. Crenshaw opens and closes the door to the indeterminacy of a feminist Black radicalism that might avow an anoriginary, an-archic Blackness. The demands and desires of a feminist Black radicalism are indeterminate, and the remedies available through the law are inadequate to their demands, and can only be. Crenshaw’s work over the ensuing decades has largely operated within a certain left-liberal position within Black politics that makes a virtue of the (putative) necessity of making concrete demands in the name of indeterminate desires.

The challenge remains to pursue the promise of an anoriginary Blackness, to seek out the impossible inventiveness of abolition against the violence of the word.

6.2 The violence of the word

Words set things in motion. I've seen them doing it.¹²

In "Violence and the Word," Robert Cover begins from a simple claim: "Legal interpretation takes place in a field of pain and death."¹³ Within that field,

the judges deal pain and death. That is not all that they do. Perhaps that is not what they usually do. But they *do* deal death, and pain. From John Winthrop through Warren Burger they have sat atop a pyramid of violence, dealing.¹⁴

In his attention to this defining feature of the law and the act of legal interpretation, Cover recalls a moment in Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," when Benjamin reaches capital punishment as the founding gesture of the law.

For if violence, violence crowned by fate, is the origin of law, then it may be readily supposed that where the highest violence, that over life and death, occurs in the legal system, the origins of law jut manifestly and fearsomely into existence.¹⁵

The essence of law is its capacity to organize and deploy violence. In Benjamin's formulation, there are forms of violence that found the law and there are forms of violence that preserve the law, and that continually re-found the law. In a precise sense, the capacity of law to deal in pain and death is the foundation of any political order founded on the "rule of law."

Cover was responding, in part, to what was then a new interest within legal scholarship in the act of interpretation.¹⁶ In different ways, Cover and Crenshaw both note the influence upon legal scholarship of what was then called "postmodernism," what might now be called "poststructuralism," that manifested in an acute concern for how (legal) meaning is *produced*. Crenshaw incorporates an encounter with poststructuralist thought into her argument, connecting legal meaning to other forms of meaning and the violence of law to other forms of violence.¹⁷ As Cover notes, earlier legal scholarship focused almost exclusively on "the traditional set of questions about how a particular word, phrase, or instrument should be given effect in some particular context," without broaching larger questions of the production of meaning, legal or otherwise.¹⁸ Cover is careful to hold onto a distinction between the interpretation of laws and all other forms of interpretation, which do not, he argues, take place in the field of pain and death. Cover allows a space for constitutional interpretation, which may "carry the seeds of violence."

But it is precisely this embedding of an understanding of political text in institutional modes of action that distinguishes *legal* interpretation from the interpretation of literature, from political philosophy, and from constitutional criticism. Legal interpretation is either played out on the field of pain and death or it is something less (or more) than law.¹⁹

Against the tide of a new movement of literary theory that paid special attention to the relationship between violence and the production of literary meaning, Cover insists that "such views

do not in any way claim for literary interpretations what I am claiming about legal interpretation—that it is part of the *practice* of political violence.”²⁰

Indeed, it is around the question of *political violence* that the liberalism of Crenshaw’s formulations takes shape. At the moment Crenshaw wrote “Race, Reform, and Retrenchment,” and into the present, liberal politics formed around and operated through the mystification of political violence and the violences that produce and reproduce law. Among the left legal theorists Crenshaw identifies with critical legal studies, Crenshaw diagnosed an inability to conceive of the state—as that which possessed a monopoly on the legitimate uses of violence—as a mechanism for pursuing radical social change. For Crenshaw, state power was a tool that might be put to multiple uses. With reference to histories of state intervention on behalf of Black Americans, from Reconstruction to the height of the civil rights movement, Crenshaw argues for the *potential* of state intervention, though she is clear that the results had been, decidedly, mixed.

Some critics of legal reform movements seem to overlook the fact that state power has made a significant difference—sometimes between life and death—in the efforts of Black people to transform their world. Attempts to harness the power of the state through the appropriate rhetorical/legal incantations should be appreciated as intensely powerful and calculated political acts. In the context of white supremacy, engaging in rights discourse should be seen as an act of self-defense. This was particularly true because the state could not assume a position of neutrality regarding Black people once the movement had mobilized people to challenge the system of oppression: either *the coercive mechanism of the state* had to be used to support white supremacy, or it had to be used to dismantle it. We know now, with hindsight, that it did both.²¹

“The coercive mechanism of the state” is another name for a field of pain and death. When Crenshaw extracts the moral credibility of Black struggle in the name of reformism, she also collapses Black self-defense and state violence. State violence is un-made as violence and re-made as Black self-defense. Of course, power always understands its own violence as defensive, as self-protection, as life-preserving. Claiming state power means claiming the (legal, rhetorical) power to transform violence into defense. Claiming violence *as violence* would augur a different politics altogether.

With the benefit of even more hindsight, we know the retrenchment of white supremacy that was at such an intense pitch during the 1980s would metastasize into a delirious and headlong rush into nothingness. In the present, decades of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls “organized abandonment” has produced a state formation in the United States that operates primarily as the enforcement wing of a new era of extractive racial capitalism.²² As public services have been privatized and dismantled, notions of (political) legitimacy have been nullified. What is left of the liberal state in the US is an apparatus for producing and collecting debts while also dispensing gratuitous violence.²³ These dynamics were, and remain, open to challenge through collective action. At the moment of Crenshaw’s writing, the possibility that “the coercive mechanism of the state” might be put to progressive ends was not unthinkable. But it was only thinkable as a parody of state power.

A state founded on something other than violence would be something other than a state.

A world founded on something other than antiblackness would be something other than a world.

The historical moment that has seen the popularization of “intersectionality” is the same moment that has seen the emergence of a scholarly discourse called “afro-pessimism.” It is the same moment that has seen a new energy around scholarly projects animated by Black

feminism, Black queerness, and Black transness. It is also the same moment that has seen the speculative tradition within Black studies move from an exterior interiority to an interior exteriority. And all of these projects in different moments speak to each other, speak past one another, speak with each other's voices. It is at their confluence that Blackness might today be theorized as anoriginary in two senses: first, in the sense that it can dispense with the need to locate some concrete historical origin of Blackness; second, this Blackness, that breaks history from within, signals the emergence of a genre of being called the Human. It is in this context that Blackness might also be theorized as anarchic, having "no beginning and no foundation."²⁴ The world we inhabit is a reaction-formation; it invented itself, and it constantly reinvents itself, against the Blackness it brought into existence. Antiblackness is a desire against negative being. Antiblackness is violence that gives the world meaning. There are otherwise worlds that endeavor only to inhabit the desire to exist in an antiblack world differently. The desire for a Black world is another violence—the violence of a feminist Black radicalism, a violence against the origins of a world—and another word.

That word, in this moment, might be abolition. Abolition is something like the lacuna internal to intersectionality. It is the radicalization of the desires collected under the name of intersectionality. Abolition and intersectionality are both placenames for desires. "Abolition," as a placename for a set of desires, is not immune from the same forms of conservatism that have crystalized within and around "intersectionality."²⁵ Crenshaw's formulations of intersectionality, and their predecessors in her earliest work, contain both the desires of a feminist Black radicalism, a radicalism emerging from an anoriginary Blackness, and the desires for coherence that manifest as a parody of state power. *If we act as if the state can protect us, if we act as if we are the state, then perhaps the state will protect us.* This is a politics that cannot imagine a world founded on something other than antiblackness. Perhaps no politics can hope to hold that image, not for more than moments. The challenge is to pursue a politics of the unimaginable. And so abolition remains not unfinished but unbegun, and we end where we began. Wherever else it might take us, Black feminism takes us to the relation between meaning and violence.

Notes

- 1 Sexton and Han, "The Devil's Choice," 143.
- 2 On the figure of the "vocal critic" of intersectionality, see Nash (2019), especially Chapter 1.
- 3 A preliminary overview of the field would include, at least, Davis (2003) and (2005), Davis and Rodriguez (2000), Kaba (2021), Gilmore (Forthcoming), and Davis, Dent, Meiners, and Richie (2022).
- 4 Wacquant, "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration," 60.
- 5 Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment," 1348.
- 6 Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment," 1349.
- 7 Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment," 1384.
- 8 Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment," 1383–4.
- 9 Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment," 1387.
- 10 "Political ontology" is an imperfect name for a genre of existence that arises within history, from a politics (and "available to historic challenge through collective struggle"), but that functions *as if* it is transhistorical, *as if* it is not available to political challenge (Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness," 37). Not for nothing, different theorists have moved between (at least) ontological, political ontological, para-ontological, and quasi-ontological to give a name to these dynamics. Throughout, there is a sense that, at some indeterminate moment, something *within* history *broke history open*. And we live on the other side of a rupture that cannot (and *ought not*) be returned to some prior state of affairs.
- 11 Bliss, "Black Feminism Out of Place," 740; emphasis added.
- 12 Bambara, "What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyway," 163.
- 13 Cover, "Violence and the Word," 1601.
- 14 Cover, "Violence and the Word," 1609.

- 15 Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 242. In a recent commentary on this moment in Benjamin's "Critique," Başak Ertür extends Benjamin's point here: "The seemingly law-preserving implementation of capital punishment is in fact a reenactment and reiteration of law-positing violence. The law is renewed and reinforced through the reenactment of the violence at its origin on the body of the condemned" (Ertür, "Conscription and Critique," 276).
- 16 Cover refers to "a recent explosion of legal scholarship placing interpretation at the crux of the enterprise of law" (Cover, "Violence of the Word," 1601–2 n. 2). Echoing Cover, in "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment," Crenshaw refers to "a recent explosion of literature on legal texts and their interpretation" (Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment," 1344 n. 54).
- 17 Cover, "Violence and the Word," 1602 n. 2.
- 18 Crenshaw engages with Jacques Derrida's work around binary oppositions (Derrida's connection to postmodern thought is self-evident) as well as Antonio Gramsci's theorizations of hegemony. The late Italian Marxist had, since the 1970s, been the subject of a renewed scholarly interest, cutting across (at least) the Birmingham school of cultural studies and the Essex School of discourse analysis. Emerging from the latter, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) is a key unspoken interlocutor of Crenshaw's thought.
- 19 Cover, "Violence and the Word," 1606–7; emphasis in original.
- 20 Cover, "Violence and the Word," 1606 n. 15; emphasis in original. Cover's argument here operates contrapuntally to Hortense Spillers's contemporaneous argument, from "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," "that sticks and bricks *might* break our bones, but words will most certainly *kill* us" (68).
- 21 Crenshaw, "Race, Reform, and Retrenchment," 1382; emphasis added.
- 22 See Gilmore (1997) and (2011). On this era in global racial capitalism, see Wang (2018), and on how the punishment bureaucracy of the United States functions to extract revenues from differently vulnerable populations, see Karakatsanis (2019).
- 23 On the features of governance after legitimacy, see Passavant (2021).
- 24 Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, 75. On this formulation of an-archē in the context of Black studies, and especially in its connections to a feminist Black speculative philosophy, see Carter (2021).
- 25 Importantly, there are also robust reactionary movements that claim the name of abolition. There are even conservative iterations of prison abolition. Both Cover and Crenshaw acknowledge that the word of the law, the appropriate legal and rhetorical incantations, are only one part of a larger story.

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7

PARABLE OF THE ADVOCATE

Speculative humanisms in Patricia J. Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*

Justin L. Mann

In those ancient mythologies [...], unmasking the sorcerer was only part of the job. It was impossible to destroy the mask without destroying the balance of things, without destroying empowerment itself. The mask had to be donned by the acquiring shaman and put to good ends.

—Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*¹

There is something magical about Patricia J. Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. Like other foundational works of Black feminist theory (I'm thinking here of Audre Lorde's "Poetry is Not a Luxury" and Barbara Christian's "The Race for Theory," but you can really take your pick) the writing resonates with a special kind of transformative essence.² Its crackle of power emanates of course from the prose, which is hauntingly beautiful, but also from the cogency of the analysis, a clarity which belies Williams's own assertion of its confusion. Adopting an analytic form that shifts seamlessly from legal analysis to cultural critique to theoretical treatise, *Alchemy* might appear at first blush to be paratactic and disjointed. But its breadth and eclectic archive not only widen the scope of legal analysis and Black feminist theorization, but help bring into view the branching reach of racism and misogyny subtending American social life. Published 30 years ago, Williams's discussion of police violence, securitization, property rights, higher education, and shopping all remain relevant and it is her distinct narrative facility, her ability to weave her analysis into a compelling story, that marks the work as essential reading in Black feminist theorization.

In this chapter, I piece together two distinct but related lines of inquiry Williams offers in her effort to turn the leaden law into gold. First, I trace Williams's critique of legal humanism. At times subliminal and at others overt, Williams calls to question liberal modernity's conception of the human through a robust interrogation of rights discourse and property. As a foundational text for Black feminist theories of intersectionality, Williams's writing on rights and property seeks to remake the law's relationship to harm and redress. Second, and related, Williams's relationship to the metaphor of alchemy also speaks to the speculative dimensions of intersectionality as a theoretical paradigm. Specifically, I consider Williams's use of the parable as an exemplary form to chart *Alchemy*'s investment in both an explanatory and a didactic narrative modality. From Williams herself to Kimberlé Crenshaw, to Alice Walker and Patricia Hill Collins, to Toni Morrison and Octavia E. Butler, Black feminist theories of intersectionality rest on the key

question “*what if?*” What if rights were not propertizing but liberating? What if people had the same humanizing regard for the Black woman gardener that they did for the garden?³ What if the untold fantastic and horrific stories of Black life occupied the center rather than the periphery of the American lexical imagination?

At stake in this reading is a conception of Black feminist (legal) theory as a speculative endeavor. Rather than merely a diagnosis of present and historical concerns for injustice, inequity, and racialized and gendered oppression, Black feminism instead imagines a world that could be. In her deployment of the speculative as both a generic and formalistic critical mode, Williams invites readers to consider the prospective frameworks of American legal traditions, and especially how such prospects invest race and gender (and, frankly, other categories of being) with meaning and power. Such epistemologies do not passively emerge but are rather actively constructed through the strange interactions between law, society, and culture. In mobilizing “alchemy”—that fantastic practice of transmutation—as a technique for reimagining this legal—and social and political—process, Williams exposes the implicit power in Black feminist speculative praxes.

7.1 Unmasking the human

Early in *Alchemy*, Williams describes a horrifying scene in the dining car of a transcontinental Amtrak trip. “Suspended in travel, encapsulated in perpetual motion,” with “no time to waste,” Williams nevertheless pauses for lunch. A fellow traveler disrupts Williams’s “reveries”—a meditation on identity—joining her for lunch. He is a stockbroker, also from New York, who “travels a lot too.” Williams and her companion chat about uprootedness, and then, ominously, about homelessness. The man discloses that he does not give money to the homeless, but “always stop(s) to chat.” Conversations with the unhoused remind the man “not to resent their presence on the streets in (his) neighborhood.” They remind the man that “they’re not just animals.” “Are you at risk of forgetting that?” Williams asks wryly, “wondering exactly whom it helps when he stops to reassure himself of a humanity unconnected to any concerted recognition of hunger or need.” In Williams’s estimation, the moment hums, “awkward” and “dangerous,” the possibility of offense hanging over their conversation. When he leaves, the man does not tip. “A small thing,” in Williams’s words.⁴

I deploy this moment to help clarify my understanding of the alchemical processes of Williams’s words. Here, the anecdote—or perhaps more properly, the parable, which I address in the next section—becomes not only a useful legal paradigm through which to examine the power of “speech as propertizing,” but also to gaze into the abyss of the human that has been at the core of Black feminist and Black radical theorization since enslavement. Black (feminist) studies has an almost single-minded preoccupation with the question of who comes under the sign of the human.⁵ This is due in no small part to ongoing forms of anti-Black violence in the US and around the world. But one of the most transformative valences of Williams’s analysis is her ability to critique the human as a legal and political category without abandoning its ontological presence. Taking the aforementioned parable as an object lesson in the ways and means of her analysis vis-à-vis the human, what Williams does so effortlessly is categorize the dehumanizing will of anti-Blackness while simultaneously celebrating the implicit humanity of Black people. Consider the sleight of hand in her discussion: in narrating the encounter, she allows the stockbroker’s conflation of homelessness and Blackness to remain implicit, while at the same time acknowledging that the danger animating the awkward encounter lay in the possibility of each offending the other by naming the racial politics hovering in the air. The reader knows Williams is not homeless. She begins the passage by explaining that she is “sitting

on a train rushing from (her) old home in New York to (her) new home in California.” Yet, the conflation of homelessness with Blackness looms over the conversation, and her interrogation of his inability to see the implicit humanity in the homeless compounds his discursive crime, what she calls “eating (his) words”: “are you at risk of forgetting” that unhoused/Black people are humans, she asks.

Williams’s indictment of the stockbroker transcends the delicious shade of the final moment, taking up the essential question of harm, an especially important area of concern for Williams, for critical legal studies (CLS), and for critical race theory (CRT) especially. It importantly points toward a theory of intersectionality that views various forms of epistemological harm with the same opprobrium. For Williams and Crenshaw, harm is the sickness intersectionality seeks to cure through redress. In both “Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Gender,” and “Mapping the Margins,” Crenshaw charts a course through the jurisprudential and social history of rights and redress, arguing in “Mapping the Margins,” for example,

Race, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination—that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different. According to this understanding, our liberatory objective should be to empty such categories of any social significance. Yet implicit in certain strands of feminist and racial liberation movements, for example is the view that the social power in delineating difference need not be the power of domination; it can be the source of social empowerment and reconstruction.

(1242)⁶

Here and elsewhere, Crenshaw highlights both the reparative potential of “identity politics” and one of its structuring logics: that race and gender (and we might extend this to other qualities of identity such as class status, sexual identity, nation of origin, etc.) appear as an “either/or” proposition. Instead, Crenshaw offers an analytic vision—intersectionality—“that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable.”⁷ Put slightly differently, despite the strange career of the term, from its earliest inception, intersectionality offered an expansive framework of rights rooted in the legibility of a coordinated network of harm and redress.⁸

For Williams, the question of harm and redress is rooted in the relationship between race, rights, and property—in their alchemy. In an often-quoted passage, Williams enumerates a theory of rights unmoored from liberal anthropocentrism, that simultaneously divests from a radical critique of rights that seeks to discard rights in favor of other forms of relationality. Rather than eliminating rights,

society must *give* them away. Unlock them from reification by giving [...] to all of society’s objects and untouchables the rights of privacy, integrity, and self-assertion; [...] flood them with the animating spirit that rights mythology fires in this country’s most oppressed psyches, and wash away the shrouds of inanimate object status, so that we may say no that we own gold but that a luminous golden spirit owns us all.⁹

I love this passage, as do many others, because of its expansive horizon of freedom, one rooted in a conception of rights as promises rather than properties.¹⁰ And I especially appreciate that this conception of rights is predicated on an intersectional theory of property, specifically propertylessness.¹¹ The passage is from the eighth chapter, “The Pain of Word Bondage,” which features

a protracted discussion of Williams's great-great-grandmother, a girl enslaved to her great-great-grandfather Austin Miller. As the chapter's title suggests, Williams writes of the entanglements of words and things that manifest through discourse, legal (especially) and otherwise. "How much was she *worth*?" Williams asks, speculating on the incredible contradiction of valuation in conceptions of the worth of human chattel. In one case, "a young woman was sold for a dollar." But, Williams recalls, the critical literature explains enslavers garnered "good return on their investment" if as little as one-third of their human cargo survived the trip from the Gold Coast to the Americas.

Williams concludes this specific meditation on the relationship between race, gender, and worth by describing her efforts to "rationalize and rescue" her ancestor's "fate"¹² (157). Although she finds herself unable to successfully argue to save her great-great-grandmother (she describes it as a "dead-end undertaking"), she explains that the best she can do is explain the transformative power of rights as a framework for the enslaved and dispossessed precisely because of the abatement of their own rights:

It is the experience of having, for survival, to argue for our own invisibility in the passive, unthreatening rhetoric of 'no-rights' which, juxtaposed with the [Critical Legal Studies'] abandonment of rights theory, is both paradoxical and difficult for minorities to accept.¹³

"Rights are to law what conscious commitments are to the psyche," she concludes. What Williams offers here, then, is not only a lancing critique of CLS, but also of the liberal conception of rights: not property but promise, not squalid but profligate, not dispossessing but humanizing.

That the human haunts Williams's conception of the superlative power of rights discourse is perhaps obvious to this point. But it bears repeating that one of *Alchemy*'s foundational concepts, "spirit murder," is key to its transformative power and to her critique of humanism. Williams introduces the concept in the following passage:

Only one form of spirit murder is racism—cultural obliteration, prostitution, abandonment of the elderly and the homeless, and genocide are some of its other guises. One of the reasons I fear what I call spirit murder—*disregard for others whose lives qualitatively depend on our regard*—is that it produces a system of formalized distortions of thought. It produces structures centered on fear and hate, a tumorous outlet for feelings elsewhere unexpressed.¹⁴

Williams's description of spirit murder is informed by both an acknowledgment of the insufficiencies of the "compartmentalized legal system" which is not capable of dealing with the "moral" crimes she enumerates—racism, genocide, dispossession, enslavement, and ultimately *disregard*. Importantly, spirit murder eschews the carceral (feminist) logics that seek individual solutions for structural problems, instead pushing at the limits of liberalism's definition of law in order to access the structure itself.¹⁵ Evoking intersectionality's most robust critique of the adjudication of harm in which it seeks to expand from a single-axis framework to a multidimensional expression of identity that redresses myriad forms of injury, spirit murder further pushes at the outer limits of what counts as law per se. Whereas carceral modalities would invite more prosecution and incarceration to suit expanding definitions of legal infractions, Williams offers spirit murder instead as a counter-modality in which a capacious, revolutionary, and radical reimagination of redress transcends the single-axis

framework that characterizes conceptions of legal harm. Put differently, Williams's definition of spirit murder as "disregard for others whose lives qualitatively depend on our regard" invites intervention at the level of the structure, seeking to repair explicitly social crimes for which there was, at the time of her writing, and remains no legal remedy. Unlike other forms of proliferating legalities, spirit murder aligns with the ambitions of Black abolitionist feminist activism and theorization, including and especially the work of Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore.¹⁶

William's critique of the human, at times implicit and at others explicit, speaks to debates that understandably occupy critical attention in Black, feminist, and queer studies. This is especially true as conflicts about the relationship between life and matter structures conversation between and among Black radical critique, Afro-/Black pessimism, new materialism, and queer of color theorization. One important conceptual shift in these conversations, and the origin for which I cannot fully account, is the transformation of Black people into Black bodies. For example, Christina Sharpe writes, "Slavery, then, simultaneously exhausted the lungs and bodies of the enslaved, even as it was imagined and operationalized as that which kept breath in and vitalized the Black body."¹⁷ Sharpe's recourse to the Black body, as distinct from Black people, lexically characterizes the reductive work of anti-Blackness in ways that bolster Williams's critique of the law. The propertizing effect of discourse stripped (and continues to strip) Black people of their inherent humanity. Having thus reduced Black *people* to *bodies*, anti-Blackness in its various guises can manifest all kinds of horrors—slow violence and swift, incarceration and police murder, mobilization for war abroad, and subjection to disregard and death at home. But unlike Sharpe, whose work necessarily underscores ongoing forms of anti-Black violence in the contemporary, Williams never accepts the body-ness of Blackness. Instead, Williams insists on the personhood of Black people, their worthiness of "*our regard*," and Black vitality—what Kevin Quashie calls "aliveness"—despite the debilitating forms of anti-Black violence. Moreover, Williams gives life to Black personhood without overinvesting in the human as a political, social, and biological category.¹⁸

In a passage describing the struggles of a trans student S., who experienced transphobic discrimination after her transition, Williams notes the links between the erasure of racism and transphobia in terms of embodiment:

Another dimension of this encounter was that the property of my blackness was all about my struggle to define myself as "somebody." Into the middle of that struggle, S. was coming to me both because I was black and because others had defined her as "nobody" (124).¹⁹

Williams goes on to describe the syllogistic relationship between "somebody" and "nobody." Initially "put off" by S.'s identification of her as another nobody, Williams realizes this:

A discursive property of black somebody-ness was to be part of a community of souls who had experienced being permanently invisible nobodies; "black" was a designation for those who had no place else to go; we were both nobody and somebody at the same time, if for different purpose (124).²⁰

The juxtaposition of the nobody–somebody dyad, Williams deduces, results in another binary: sameness and difference. She and S. are alike and not in their difference, their relationship to each other, and their relationship to how power works on them. All of this works in and through the production of their embodiment. In Williams's estimation, "property is nothing more than the

mind's enhancement of the body's limitation." In this passage, Williams collapses personhood into the body and draws synecdochal links between the persona, body, and territory. The dispossession of Black people from land and self through the racist processes of captivity, enslavement, and segregation produces a paradox for Williams. On the one hand, these processes have leeched the personhood out of Black people, leaving us legally subject to a body of law built on our social oppression. On the other, as Williams writes, "a discursive property of black somebodyness was to be part of a community of souls who had experienced being permanently invisible nobodies." Thus, the experience of dispossession is both embodying and personifying. Here we see one of the most important, if implicit, articulations of Williams's theory of rights as it relates to race: whiteness conjured race as a social system, then codified that system through emerging legal traditions that simultaneously opposed monarchical rule and established legal frameworks for property that were implicitly anti-Black and colonial. Whiteness as a social identity and legal discourse establishes and reinforces the disappearance of Black personhood, leaving Black bodies behind.

But Williams goes further than merely diagnosing the racist and colonial fantasies animating contemporary legal practice. Instead, she evolves a contrapuntal conception of embodied and personified Blackness, one that takes up all of the vicissitudes of discrimination and exclusion in order to reimagine law as a welcoming and liberatory racialized structure. Fantasy and speculation—the eponymous *Alchemy*—are central to how Williams achieves this reframing. While the hypothetical is an important legal form, especially for legal pedagogies, and although she mobilizes the hypothetical throughout *Alchemy* (especially in tandem with her encounters with students) Williams's key explanatory and argumentative mode—that is the *form* her writing takes most frequently—is that of the parable. After offering a brief explanation of the relationship between parables and the fantastic, I describe three textual moments in which Williams's writing embodies the parable in order to highlight the text's form and function. That is, I show that the parable, a speculative form itself, unlocks Williams's conception of the possibility of what the law might be, redoubling her investment in the speculative and thus the relevance of speculative theorization to Black feminist theorization of the Black radical horizon.

7.2 Parable of the advocate

The parable, according to literary critic Northrop Frye,

is a more highly developed form (than the fable) with a greater tendency to contain its own moral. In the fable, mythical stylizing (talking animals and the like) is a regular feature of the narrative; in the parable the stylizing is less obvious.²¹

Rather than explicitly stating the moral or lesson as a fable or exemplum might, the parable instead offers more allegorical and metaphorical elements. Writing of a different historical and religious context than Williams, Mary Raschko explains in *The Politics of Middle English Parables*,

Like all narratives, (parables) are fundamentally incomplete, leaving their readers to navigate gaps in information and mull over questions raised implicitly but left unanswered. And like all instructional stories, their ethical implications depend upon the literary context in which they appear (the stories' relationships to accompanying morals or their functions within larger texts) as well as their readers' subjective interpretations, informed by their particular experience of living. (7-8)²²

As a vernacular form, parabolic fiction might fall under the rubric of “idle talk,” the politics of which Susan Philips describes as not merely gendered speech, but rather a “problematic” and “productive” form for its historical moment.²³ The parable is thus a powerful speculative form that invites metaphorical links between analogous worlds, one fictional and the other real. The purpose of such analogical thinking is to explicitly draw out the ethical and moral dimensions of life.

While these contexts are far removed from contemporary Black feminist theoretical conversations about race and rights, the parable nevertheless endures as a gendered vernacular exemplary tradition. Indeed, parabolic forms have been central to Black feminist theorization throughout its long history, and at least since the 1980s, they have been a critical language for centering Black feminist thought in an intellectual economy that privileged other analytic modes. From Alice Walker’s story of her mother tending her garden to Crenshaw’s important framing of intersectionality around the parable of the traffic accident and the basement, the parable has served the dual purposes of highlighting the theoretical importance of daily life and departing from prose that is intentionally dense.

Black feminist authors including Ntozake Shange, Toni Morrison, and of course, Octavia E. Butler all employed parabolic fiction in their literary reflections on Black life. In their hands, parables accomplish the important work of transformation. Sula’s fantasy of Ajax stripped first from alabaster, then to gold, and finally to loam, and Butler’s speculative musings on the rise of authoritarianism capture the didactic and explanatory, if analogical qualities of parabolic fiction. In Williams, these qualities emerge as the narrative often spirals around a constellation of shorter examples that characterize the larger point.

While Frye distinguishes the parable from the fable, it is worth spending at least a little bit of time thinking through what “stylizing,” to use his term, offers Williams in terms of the thematic organization of her narrative. Williams opens *Alchemy* with an actual parable. Set apart from the rest of the book, and not entered on the table of contents, this short, untitled narrative tells the story of a community of people who deal in “Word Magic.” Eventually, the most skilled word mages reach their apotheosis, and pass their time playing games with their power, until they tire of the frivolity and instead set about learning “Undoing Words.” The aloof Gods abandon the “Celestial City,” the home they built with the grammatical power in favor of a voyage on the Deep Blue Sea, where they might get “Beyond the Power of Words.” A double return and line space separate the experiences of these god-priests from “dying” and “drowning mortals” who alternately “cr(y) out their rage and suffering” and “reach silently and desperately” for aid from the magi. But it is the hooves of the mages’ steeds and the anchors from their boats that batter, oppress, and ultimately tantalize with the promise of life and freedom.

No explicit moral marks this passage. There is no fairy tale closing, promising “happily ever after.” No metacritical narrator comments on the plight of the dying and drowned nor laments the disregard of the god-priests. And yet, this introduction to Williams’s theory captures the form and function of law as Williams imagines it. Rather than a scriptural exegesis with law as its ur-text, Williams offers complex hermeneutics with narrative at its center. The parable that opens *Alchemy* is at once a parable of advocacy and advocates. It narrates the apotheosis of law, the analog ascension of CLS, and marks the abandonment and oppression both law and CLS perpetrate in their quest for “Superstanding” and “Undoing Words.” It is a cautionary tale, one that rings with the Icarian warning of hubris and ambition.

In Williams’s hands, the parable is more than a mere warning about intellectual abandonment. It is also a powerful vector for imagining social transformation. During the chapter “Owning the Self in a Disowned Word” (which, I should mention, teaches beautifully in many contexts), Williams charts a course through a number of vignettes, all of which probe at the limits of

care. Moving swiftly from topics as far-ranging as Temple Grandin, Frank Perdue inoculating his chickens, daytime television, and tabloid journalism, Williams alights on her central point: care and the structural harm society visits upon children. Taking up the abortion, adoption, and the incarceration of pregnant mothers, Williams exposes the ironic and nonsensical regard the state has for the lives of mother and child. Williams describes two related cases that contradict each other: one, in Missouri, in which an incarcerated woman has sued the state for release, claiming that her detention violates her unborn fetus's 13th amendment rights, and another in Washington, DC, in which a judge incarcerated a pregnant woman "to keep her off the streets and out of drug-temptation's way, ostensibly to protect her fetus."²⁴ Taking into account these cases, as well as the chicks, Temple Grandin, and the range of other parabolic scenes that cycle through the early moment of the chapter, Williams, concludes,

the Idea of the child (the fetus) becomes more important than the actual Child (who will be reclassified as an adult in the flick of an eye in order to send him back to prison on his own terms), or the actual condition of the woman whose body the real fetus is a part.²⁵

Williams describes this bargaining as a trade in flesh, both in terms of sex work and meat markets. Seeing to her own sense of becoming undone, resisting the disintegrating force that threatens to turn her into a "brown spill," Williams applies a compress, seeking to soothe her throbbing head.

Williams's attention turns, both analytically and narratively, from the matter of pregnancy in prison to a much gnarlier legal conundrum. Williams reads in the newspaper that a white woman and her husband are suing their sperm bank after the woman gave birth to a Black child. Seeking damages on behalf of her daughter for the psychological trauma of "racial teasing and embarrassment," the woman, in the words of her lawyer, "is determined that what happened to her and her daughter doesn't happen to any other couple." Williams's response to this thinking is searing and her solution is incredible, but it is worth lingering with this framing for just a moment as it highlights precisely the kind of parabolic analysis Williams instructs employs throughout *Alchemy*. The damages the woman seeks on behalf of her child center her trauma as at least as important as her daughter's. Williams wonders whether she and her mother should sue on the same grounds, then broadens out to question whether Black mothers should join in a class action against the twinned injustices of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy.

More importantly, this line of inquiry leads her to the incredibly provocative conclusion, which she calls "guerilla insemination." Remarking on a poster from the OB/GYN department at the University of Wisconsin, Williams notes the sperm bank offers "fifty dollars for every semen specimen '[they] are able to use' in an artificial insemination program," which has the following caveats: donors must be under 35 and have a college education. A meat market of a different kind, the trade in sperm reinscribes preferences of race and ability and the market of assistive reproduction technology (ART). With this provocation in mind Williams resolves the following:

I think, in a technological age, guerilla warfare must be redefined. I dream of the New Age manifesto: we must all unite, perhaps with the help of white male college graduates who are willing to smuggle small hermetically sealed vials of black sperm into the vaulted banks of unborn golden people; we must integrate this world from the inside out. We must smuggle not the biological code alone, but the cultural experience. We must shake up biological normativity [...].

I suggest guerrilla insemination to challenge the notion of choice, to complicate it in other contexts: the likelihood that white women would choose black characteristics if offered the supermarket array of options of blond hair, blue-green eyes, and narrow upturned noses. What happens if it is no longer white male seed that has the prerogative of dropping noiselessly and invisibly into black wombs, swelling ranks and complexifying identify? Instead it will be disembodied black seed that will swell white bellies; the symbolically sacred vessel of the white womb will bring the complication home to the guarded intimacy of white families, and into the Madonna worship of the larger culture.²⁶

I have excerpted here at length to highlight the radical humor and mad, yet gleeful disdain Williams invokes in her incitement to guerrilla insemination and her indictment of the “health-care” industry that privileges white over Black lives.²⁷ As she explains later, this is not necessarily a serious charge, but rather one that mobilizes the darker fantasies of miscegenation to highlight a) the historic uses of Black women’s bodies in the service of white supremacist and capitalist development, b) ongoing forms of medical racism and eugenics that linger in the contemporary (in)fertility market, and c) the radical potential of disrupting biological and legal racist regimes through a form of insurrection that seems like science fiction. In this passage, I see Williams as remaking the parable, wrenching it out of its historical context into a contemporary one that speaks to modern issues. Although as much the very manifesto she claims to seek as a parable, it is the exemplary function of this incitement that is so compelling. Williams highlights, through disgust and apprehension, the real horror of modernity: the rape and breeding of Black women for more chattel, the lingering forms of eugenics that exist in contemporary bioethics and biomedical practice, and the future of Black life in an anti-Black world. Written now almost 30 years ago, this passage has grown, if anything, more prescient as new forms of eugenic thinking continue to saturate ideas about parentage and pregnancy. This is to say nothing of the staggering inequities in medical care that fall squarely along racial lines. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has thrown what have long been subtler contours of unequal practice into sharper relief, but differentials in care before, during, and after birth have produced an infant mortality rate twice as high for Black children as white. These figures are nearly identical in the death of Black (and Native) mothers.

In this dark parable, one which juxtaposes the horror of guerilla insemination (a fantasy) against the horror of racial “choice” in reproductive processes (a reality), Williams speaks directly to the role of the fantastic in shaping the exemplary form. The turn to science fiction and horror is instructive insofar as it invites both analogy and estrangement. Williams even alludes to two key texts—Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818)—inviting her reader to consider the counter-counterfactual futures in which guerilla insemination never happens, and in which the unmasked monster of eugenic preference runs rampant.²⁸ In this future, which might be called the present, things like hatred and opportunity linger in the genetic sequence. They are bloodborne, transmitted from parent to child through the process of reproduction. As Williams writes,

How profound the hatred, how deep the bigotry that lives beneath the skin, that wakens in this image of black life blooming within white. It becomes an image not of encompassment but of parasitism. It is an image that squeezes racism out from the pores of people who deny they are racist.²⁹

In one of the many framing devices Williams deploys to prime her reader for the intellectual sojourn they are about to undertake, she narrates a discussion she has with her sister, a historian.

“I hope that that result will be a text that is multilayered—that encompasses the straightforwardness of real life and reveals the complexity of meaning,” Williams tells her sister, describing her ambition for the project. “But what is the book *about*,” her sister retorts. “Howard Beach, polar bears, and food stamps,” Williams “snaps” in reply.³⁰ From the outset, these three terms appear mystified, “floating signifiers” that mean little in a mutual relationship. And while the relationship between Howard Beach and food stamps may appear direct, polar bears as the middle term is intentionally confounding.

Williams holds the polar bear until the book’s conclusion until she gives in to what she describes as “polar-bear musings”; “Hungry and patient, impassive and exquisitely timed. The brilliant bursts of exclusive territoriality. A complexity of messages implied in our being.” As a final parable and perhaps the least scrutable piece of writing in the book, the turn to polar bears leads the reader to the importance of parabolic thinking. Lyrical and ponderous, the polar-bear musings capture the spirit of Williams’s speculation. In many ways, her deployment of this and other parables exemplifies the ephemeral desires that coalesce in Black feminists’ concerns for intersectionality and its offshoots. Not simply a will to knowledge, intersectionality rather calls into being a mercurial matrix of identity, one that requires an agile imagination to understand and resolve. I don’t mean to suggest that Williams (or Crenshaw or others for that matter) consider identity to be fantastic or imaginary, but rather that key conceptions including harm, redress, and justice emerge through a radical encounter between what ought to be and what is. Intersectionality is not legible to conventional legal forms, which purposefully and explicitly erase their complexity and nuance. Williams’s speculative, parabolic imaginary thus rewrites the parameters and scripts of contemporary legal doctrine. In short, the turn to polar bears connects the cataclysmic precarity of the threatened hunters to their survivability, their resilience, and their ferocity—a way of thinking and being Williams models in her theory of race and rights.

Notes

- 1 Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).
- 2 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007); Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *The Black Feminist Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 11–23.
- 3 Henry Louis Gates and Valerie A. Smith, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 1180–4.
- 4 Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 15–17.
- 5 This is especially true in Black feminist biomedical criticism, which I discuss in section 7.2. See Khiara Bridges, *Reproducing Race: An Ethnography of Pregnancy as a Site of Racialization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2020); Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1997). Many trace the concern for Black (in)humanity to Sylvia Wynter’s landmark work “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” which has been especially central to Afropessimistic accounts of anti-Black violence and Black death. See Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR (East Lansing, Mich.)* 3, no. 3 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>; Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). Recent work by Jennifer C. Nash, Samantha Pinto, and Kevin Quashie reveal the relationship between humanity and Black life. See Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Samantha Pinto, *Infamous Bodies: Early Black Women’s Celebrity and the Afterlives of Rights* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black*

- Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021). The question of the human is also important for Black law and literature especially in terms of the relationship between citizenship and the human scholars. See Stephen Michael Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Derrick Ramon Spires, *The Practice of Citizenship: Black Politics and Print Culture in the Early United States* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).
- 6 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1242. See also Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989: 139–67).
 - 7 Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection," 1244, fn 9.
 - 8 For more on the career of the term "intersectionality," see Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 33–59.
 - 9 Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 165.
 - 10 See Jennifer C. Nash, "Writing Black Beauty," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1086/703497>. For a critique of Williams's theory of rights and their transformative power, see Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 121–8, especially 27.
 - 11 For a discussion of the racialized origins of property rights, see Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787>.
 - 12 Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 157.
 - 13 Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 158.
 - 14 Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 72, my emphasis.
 - 15 On carceral feminism, see Inderpal Grewal, *Saving the Security State: Exceptional Citizens in Twenty-First-Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Victoria Law, "Against Carceral Feminism," *Jacobin* 10, no. 17 (2014).
 - 16 See Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2003); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).
 - 17 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 112.
 - 18 In her critique of humanization, Zakkiyah Iman Jackson writes, "assimilation into the category of 'universal humanity' should not be equated with black freedom." Williams never gives in to this kind of Romantic notion of what the human offers in terms of liberation epistemology. Instead, she shows that the human is a construction of law and politics, one with dire social and cultural consequences. See Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, 27.
 - 19 Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 124.
 - 20 Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 124.
 - 21 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 300.
 - 22 Mary Raschko, *The Politics of Middle English Parables: Fiction, Theology, and Social Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 7–8. I distinguish between the parable and the anecdote, which Nicole Fleetwood describes as tool to "personalize and generalize" (492). These lines are blurry, and the many stories that fill the pages of *Alchemy* likely also qualify as anecdotes in Fleetwood's conception of the term, but one useful distinction is that the anecdote works through the reification of broad concepts. Thus Fleetwood's discussion of the circulation of prison photography serves as an object lesson—one that is ideally recognizable—through her description of the taking and circulation of photographs by people touched by the system of incarceration. The parable works in the opposite way, abstracting notions that often appear as concrete: race, rights, and property, for example. See Nicole R. Fleetwood, "Posing in Prison: Family Photographs, Emotional Labor, and Carceral Intimacy," *Public Culture* 27, no. 3 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2896195>.
 - 23 Susan E. Phillips, *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 6.
 - 24 Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 184.
 - 25 Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 184–5.
 - 26 Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 188.
 - 27 "Mad" here evokes Williams's own self-description as a "mad" law professor, a term she uses to designate a sense of disorientation and rage at the world around her. See also La Marr Jurelle Bruce, *How to*

Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

28 Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 188, 89.

29 Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 189.

30 Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 6.

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8

READING AT THE NEXUS OF NEGLECT AND FETISHIZATION

The “occult” of intersectionality

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This chapter weaves together Ann duCille’s (1994) insights about the twinned politics of neglect and fetishization when it comes to Black women’s intellectual contributions with Jennifer Nash’s (2019) call to shift feminist interpretive politics. Questioning antagonistic interpretive stances that amplify differences as sites of irrevocable opposition as well as affective modes of defensiveness and possessiveness with regard to intersectionality, Nash suggests reading (and working) in ways that foreground multiple genealogies and acknowledge articulations across texts and contexts (2019, 107–10).

To illustrate how a more intimate, both/and (and in many ways intersectional) way of reading can illuminate shared commitments together with differences, I juxtapose some of my work with Nash’s to begin to think through our mutual interest in what might be called the “occult” of intersectionality. In the spirit of Nash’s call for relationality, and reflecting on the entwined forces of adulation and neglect deftly laid out by duCille, I consider the degree to which much of my work on Anna Julia Cooper and on intersectionality has primarily taken up questions of disregard and willful ignorance (one side of duCille’s occult). Turning to Nash’s writing, I ponder whether she might situate her work on the “flip” side of the coin duCille delineated—and the degree to which the pitfalls of respect and veneration, if not adulation and fetishization, have shaped her thinking about intersectionality and Black feminist intellectual histories more broadly.

If either/or modes of interpretation (the driving force of so much of our work in academe) tend to amplify differences as sites of irrevocable opposition, intersectional both/and ways of reading can help illuminate permeability and shared interests *together with* differences. In addition to their (spurious) obfuscation, dualistic modes of interpretation impede coalitional, relational possibilities. As duCille and Nash each (differently) suggest, how we approach, read, study, teach, cite, and acknowledge (Black feminist) lives and histories, bodies, and bodies of knowledge matters.

8.1 Groundings

Intersectionality has a rich intellectual and political history and continues to have an enormous impact as it is taken up across communities as a method, analytic, lens, identity formation,

legal framework, policy lens, and political strategy. Yet, many intersectionality applications are troubling. For instance, Kimberlé Crenshaw (2011) observes a disquieting and rather quotidian dynamic—theories and policies claiming intersectionality often also are “re-marginalizing Black women” in intersectionality’s name. Placed in a double bind akin to one described by duCille as “under erasure, outside of tradition” (1993, 147), intersectionality can quickly transmogrify into an “empty suit” (Crenshaw 2011, 231–2) severed from some of its key contexts in Black feminist theorizing and critical race theory. Crenshaw (2014) thus notes, “although intersectionality was coined to counter the disembodiment of Black women from law, the challenge today is to resist the disembodiment of Black women from intersectionality itself” (n.p.).

One way to try to counter Black women’s erasure and disembodiment from their intellectual traditions and contributions can be found in Nellie McKay’s notion of “moorings” (1998, 365)—meaning, in terms of intersectionality, moorings in the work of Black and women of color feminists who in large part crafted intersectionality (over time, across contexts, and in multiple sites and modalities) to be put to work to address multiple sites of inequality and create a more just world. To consider moorings does not mean intersectionality has been (or is) static, that Black feminisms are singular or homogeneous, or that all Black feminist work (over time or presently) is equivalent to or stems from intersectionality. Moorings do, however, require thinking about docks, anchorages, safe harbors—landing places and points of departure. At the level of interpretation and critical stances, this entails, for instance, citing, studying, and teaching intersectionality’s histories in Black and women of color feminist theory, recognizing it as the fruit of careful labors—as coming from what P. Gabrielle Foreman characterizes, in tracing histories of Black feminist literary criticism, as “cultivated ground” (2013, 311).

I borrow from McKay’s and Foreman’s metaphors to underscore how intersectionality’s “ground” has been tilled and cared for (primarily) by Black women and women of color, carving out space for ideas to flourish and for a field (of ideas) to grow. Sustained, collective labors helped foster intersectionality’s use and exponential growth: its roots (or rhizomes) have spread, tendrils unfurled, leaves fluttered, and seeds traveled—blown in the wind across oceans, whirled “in the air” (at times disconcertingly) in new contexts (Bilge 2013, 414).

Noting intersectionality came from somewhere, accounting for its rootedness in these (diverse, varied) intellectual/political traditions can be a future-oriented and intergenerational act—labors engaged in so as to pass down knowledge about interconnected structures of power, simultaneous privilege and oppression, and visions of collective justice. Setting aside these labors, lives, and histories (e.g., via citation practices that entirely ignore women of color theorists’ contributions to intersectionality, or by citing their work in passing without meaningful engagement¹) can be one means by which intersectionality is decoupled from its Black feminist and women of color feminist origins, thereby violently disembodimenting a body of knowledge.

And yet, as Nash delineates, trying to guard against such cleaving and gutting, if not erasure and willful forgetting, by tightly pinning down intersectionality (and, by inference, Black feminist theorizing and intellectual/political history more broadly), also can undercut intersectionality’s possibilities and obscure its complex histories. Via (often but not always) well-intended efforts to defend intersectionality, one can reach similar end results—checking intersectional possibilities, disregarding Black women’s lives, and suppressing Black feminist knowledges. Nash is thus wary (and perhaps weary) of stifling forms of fealty, adherence not only to a fixed idea if not singular genealogy of intersectionality but also constricted visions of static, readily definable Black feminist knowledges and histories more broadly (2019, 59–80).

When or how might *cultivated ground*, as Foreman describes it, become *hallowed ground*, against which Nash cautions, with intersectionality so revered it gets put on a pedestal—so sacred as to be seemingly (or rightfully) beyond critique? If Black feminist theorizing, including

intersectionality, sits so high on the shelf—venerated but not read meaningfully (even if widely cited, as a kind of obligatory signifier), another kind of stasis and form of erasure sets in (see Cooper 2017, 2; May 2021a; Williams 2017, 27). Thus, in addition to the potential for slippage between understanding intersectionality as *cultivated ground* and *hallowed terrain*, Nash points out how notions of *territory* also need unpacking.

If, from Foreman, we understand cultivated ground as carefully tended so that a range of Black feminist ideas, including intersectionality, might blossom, regenerate, and pass down, then, in the contexts of *territory*, if not “territorialism,” we find intersectionality held down by the tight constraints of “textual fidelity” in a plot twist Nash describes as “intersectional originalism” (2019, 59–180, 2016). Intersectionality’s definitional parameters can be overly policed, with critics clinging tightly to (rather fixed and at times narrow, acontextual, even essentializing) readings of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s two early key articles on the subject, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex ...” (1989) and “Mapping the Margins ...” (1991), with Black feminism “conscripted” into affective states characterized by both “defensiveness” and “proprietary attachments to intersectionality” (Nash 2019, 3).

Nash unpacks how the interpretive landscape around intersectionality marshals Crenshaw’s work in particular ways, via “a politics of citationality that explicitly references Crenshaw” and “that performs its care for intersectionality through its loyalty to the analytic’s founding scholars” (2019, 63, 65). This (performance of) care and loyalty, I find, often has a twist: though ubiquitous, such (frequently superficial) citations often brush over nuanced through-lines in Crenshaw’s work—the layers of her arguments, citational and methodological strategies, and cross-disciplinary as well as historical thinking barely attended to. Focused unswervingly on Black women’s lives to address structural injustice, Crenshaw has approached intersectionality as a provisional heuristic, not a fixed entity with set meanings or predetermined bounds. What does it mean to situate Crenshaw as arbiter of a sedimented, unchanging notion of intersectionality—what kind of violence does this kind “recognition” or acknowledgment entail?

Via citational fealty and an either/or politics of reading, diametrically opposed legal/political traditions—intersectionality and originalism—can thus paradoxically converge (see Nash 2016, 2019). Scholars/practitioners/theorists/advocates of intersectionality can take up (rather than take on) an originalistic line of argument—one that aligns with end logics contrary to an intersectional (legal) tradition (which, for one, exposes hermeneutical injustice and inequality, suggesting language and testimony are not, in fact, untouched by structural inequality, hierarchy, and power asymmetries), and one that, in an epistemic twist, enacts violence against intersectionality in its name.

8.2 A middle ground

This potential slippage, from *marking history* (and insisting on remembrance, care, and cultivation as politically important aspects of our work) to *marking territory* (and animating settler colonial legacies of property, ownership, and rights), requires attention. How to free (up) intersectionality’s possibilities and avoid placing a kind of statutory limit on its meanings, as Nash (2019) urges, without severing ties to such a degree that it becomes an empty (apolitical, ahistorical) free-floating signifier, about which Sirma Bilge worries² (2020, 2308–10)?

Working from within intersectionality’s (ontologically, epistemologically, and politically) different logics, an answer may lie in both/and (intersectional) ways of thinking. Because intersectionality approaches either/or logics with skepticism and invites us to inhabit generative spaces suspended between (ostensible) opposites, it requires a different mindset, one that starts from juxtaposition, or, building from Valerie Smith, “aposition” (1994, 671–2). This helps keep same-

ness and difference in tension, unpack false universals, question too-neat claims, and identify shared commitments without dissolving important distinctions.

Thinking at the juncture of different structures, standpoints, vectors of power, and facets of identity, intersectional “both/and” logics invite us to dwell in a middle space and interstitial temporality. Such an approach to theorizing from lived experience, doing history, and forging a political future has a long tradition in Black feminist thought, including strategies put forth by early Black feminist theorist and educator Anna Julia Cooper who suggested our work must address multiple sites of inequality at once and also be accountable to three timeframes at once—the present, the “prospective” future, and our “retrospective” past(s) (1988, 26–7).

Nash, too, advocates reading and interpreting (Black feminist theory) via a both/and mode, one she characterizes as working alongside, inhabiting an intimate, relational mode of thinking rather than resorting to thinking against/in opposition as a default mode of critique and interpretation. She suggests reading “sideways” or “side by side” (2019, 108) and taking up a way of “thinking through together” (105)—an approach that corresponds with K. Bailey Thomas’ urging us to think “in tandem” when it comes to intersectional and decolonial analyses (2020, 518).

Since intersectionality approaches either/or ways of thinking with skepticism and invites us to inhabit generative spaces suspended in and between (ostensibly stark) opposites, a key “both/and” challenge here, then, is to explore how we might historicize intersectionality and acknowledge how it has been “cultivated,” where, when, and by whom (Foreman 2013), without keeping it so tethered to origins that it’s effectively tied down, bound, and grounded (Nash 2019, 2016). A generative model for pursuing this question and inhabiting this way of reading can be found duCille’s landmark 1994 essay “The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies.”

8.3 The occult of intersectionality?

Nearly 30 years ago, duCille unpacked the “occult” of true Black womanhood as a two-sided coin or double-faced (and, at times, Janus-faced) episteme. On one side, Black women’s bodies and texts are approached as sacred, yet also fixated on, obsessed over, and even fetishized as a “hyperstatic alterity” (duCille 1994, 592). On the other side, they are neglected—but in an active way, meaning studiously ignored, “badly misfigured” (594), treated as unworthy of study, not cited, and forgotten. Notably, this duality is not stable or fixed, but constantly shifting.³

DuCille highlights how, upon Zora Neale Hurston’s rediscovery from obscurity (thanks to [primarily] Black women’s dogged recovery efforts to unearth, archive, publish, teach, and write about Hurston), a new problem emerged, a specific form of frenzied commodification duCille calls “Hurstonism.” She writes,

black women writers such as Hurston are once again exotic subjects. They are exotic this time out, however, not because they are rarely taught or seldom read, but because, in the midst of the present, multicultural moment, they have become politically correct, intellectually popular, and commercially precious sites of literary and historical inquiry. (duCille 1994, 594)

Further, explains duCille, “This interest—which seems to me to have reached occult status—increasingly marginalizes both the black women critics and scholars who excavated the fields in question and their black feminist ‘daughters’ who would further develop those fields” (596). Calling out cooptation, and the snuffing out of Black women’s voices and ideas, duCille chal-

lenges (white women and Black male) scholars to stop decentering the work and words of Black feminist critics in their midst (colleagues and published authors as well as young scholars and would-be authors), *all the while relying on their knowledge production* to animate their own arguments (and fuel their careers).

DuCille clarifies that her layered reflections about this conundrum, across two centuries of African American literature and criticism, are “not simply about property rights, about racial or gender territoriality”—though, at first glance (or via a careless reading), that may seem to be the case. She attests that she has little interest in claiming an essentialist “privileged access rooted in common experience” which, duCille worries, “restricts this work to a narrow orbit” (602).

Yet, questions of cooptation, exploitation, and commodification continue to nag at her—as does the enduring need to be taken “seriously not as objectified subjects, . . . but as critics and scholars reading and writing our own literature and history.” Further, notes duCille, Black women’s literature and Black feminist criticism is not (and should not be approached as) an “anybody-can-play pick-up game performed on a wide-open, untrammelled field” (603). Echoing duCille 20 years later, Foreman reiterates this claim to suggest too many (white and/or male) scholars, today, continue to “gambol unabashed” (Foreman 2013, 309) on the grounds of Black women’s literature and Black feminist criticism.

Turning from Black feminist literary criticism and history to debates about intersectionality—its uses, origins, meanings, possibilities, futures, and histories (and, perhaps, its occult status)—we have much to learn from duCille’s observations. First, her work helps illuminate the violations of *disinterest* as an active pursuit and documents how neglect, as an act, has an afterlife that haunts the future and distorts our understanding of the past. In the context of intersectionality’s intellectual and political histories (and central arguments), if we care to (or are able to) note them, we must contend with erasure and consider lost (or nearly lost texts) Black feminist and women of color texts, ideas, and voices.

At the same time, duCille’s occult has a reverse side—she underscores how *interest* (as reverence if not fetishization) also can violate, distort, silence, and erase. When the two coalesce (interest with disregard), the occult solidifies. Furthermore, simultaneous systemic denigration of Black women’s lives, ideas, and persons combines with using those same persons, lives, and ideas for (Black men’s and white women’s) personal and professional gain. In short, both forgetting and fetishization can, differently, snuff out origins and contexts, sidestep labors, uproot ideas, and suppress the lives and people that shaped them.

Next, I contextualize how, in “duCilleian” terms, my work (on intersectionality and beyond) falls roundly on the “neglect” side of things, taking up what might be characterized as the occult of not-knowing. I also amble alongside Nash to consider how the paths we have been trekking across intersectionality’s (past, present, future) landscapes and affective dimensions might be understood as interrelated, as skirting the edges of duCille’s two-sided occult, even as some intimacies in our work may not at first glance be obvious (in part because it also diverges, is perhaps even at times at variance).

8.4 Dismemory, disinterest, neglect

Much of my research lies in contemporary intersectionality studies and in 19th-century Black feminist studies, particularly Anna Julia Cooper’s ideas (many of which I find offer an interesting early example of intersectionality [May 2012]). Over many years spent with Cooper’s texts, including her (once lost) 1892 volume, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (Cooper 1988) and her (still barely read, if known of) 1925 dissertation on the Haitian and

French revolutions (Cooper 2006), questions of loss, silence, and disregard have called my attention and shaped my thinking (May 2021a, 2021b, 2008, 2007).

This pull toward absences and silences is not necessarily surprising. Thanks to the loving labors of recovery, significant portions of Cooper's work are now readily available in print and online: in turn, those of us who study Cooper urge that her contributions (as a scholar, educator, and community activist) be more widely read and fully appreciated. Cooper scholars also confront questions of loss and erasure, regularly coming up against all we *no longer have* of Cooper's life's work. Unpublished writings and speeches, vanished curricula, all manner of missing personal records, letters, and mislaid ephemera, various research projects denied funding, publications denied circulation—all this and more is irrevocably lost to time.

Questions of shadowy neglect and epistemic arrogance have not abated and continue to shape my thinking on Cooper. I thus recently suggested Cooper should be taken up in theorizing archival silences and Black feminist strategies for navigating the archive's holdings (May 2021b). I also suggested leaving her contributions out of the history of international political thought is troubling if not highly problematic (May 2021a). Certainly, Cooper's historical analysis of the Haitian and French revolutions in her 1925 Sorbonne dissertation remains generally unnoticed—an ongoing oversight that needs to be addressed across a variety of fields. Furthermore, to ignore her contributions to international thought implicitly reinforces a distorting frame that positions US Black feminist work and histories as fundamentally domestic—and, thus, seemingly irrelevant to international thought or transnational feminist concerns.

What has taken some time to appreciate, however, is the degree to which Cooper's fundamental wish to be heard as a witness giving testimony as a Black woman (while simultaneously suspecting she might *not* be heard or understood – would remain an “uncomprehended cadenza” [Cooper 1998, i; see also May 2021a]) has profoundly shaped how I think about intersectionality's contemporary uses and historical trajectories—the questions asked, textual details noted, and kinds of gaps and distortions attended to. In terms of the “occult” of intersectionality, then, I have dedicated substantially more energies to *neglect*—inattention, disregard, the politics of forgetting, and willful ignorance.

Ever mindful of the quicksand-like disappearance and violation of Black women's texts, a dynamic Gabrielle Foreman describes as “dismemory” (2010, n.p.), I have focused intently on practices of not-knowing and disregard. Considering dismemory's ripple effects on intersectionality's uptake, histories, and debates, I have worried about (Black women's) disposability and disappearance and questioned patterns in intersectionality's interpretive literatures that seem unnervingly parallel to a phenomenon described by Nellie McKay. She notes disturbing “reluctances to learn about African American literature, its background and long history of serious scholarship” and makes clear such “disregard for the work of black pioneers in the field is reprehensible” (1998, 365). DuCille, too, homes in on a related dynamic: that of cavalier engagement with and selective taking (without attribution or context) of Black women's literature and literary criticism (1994, 603).

Concerns about such epistemic/critical demeanors (of neglect if not willful ignorance, cavalier use, and cooptation) underlie my concerns about intersectionality's citation practices and networks, about decoupling intersectionality from its historical origins and texts (and labors and politics), and plea that we think through intersectionality's histories and uses via power-accountable reading practices that engage in juxtaposition and both/and thinking (May 2022). In this vein, I have also raised questions about the epistemological roots and political implications of intersectionality's perennial illegibility and unhearability⁴ (May 2015).

In short, much of my work has focused on (a)voided histories, stifled words, unheard witnesses, and bodies of knowledge treated as disposable, unworthy of mention (citation) or study,

as well as disremembered communities of knowers (specifically, Black and women of color writers/artists/activists/educators). However, duCille's framework helps illuminate how I really have not fully engaged in a two-sided reading of intersectionality's histories and uptake, to how neglect *and* the sacred, together, form the occult.

8.5 Revered, sacred, sacrosanct

Thinking back through duCille, and turning to Nash, I wonder whether she might see some of her work as centered more on the sacred side of this double-sided coin. Questions of intersectionality as sacrosanct if not sanctified (Black feminist) ground, combined with misdirected notions of/practices of care, for instance, could be seen as a through-line in how Nash astutely unpacks a series of preoccupations with intersectionality (regarding territory, rescue, and authenticity) in women's studies as a field—preoccupations that signal how forms of scholarly attention can slip into fascination, fixation, obsession, even fetish (2019, 59–110).

Furthermore, in her analysis of various constraints and pitfalls at work in approaching (or fencing off) intersectionality as hallowed terrain, Nash delineates a range of affective constrictions and tethers. For instance, she challenges fetishized marginality as Black women's assigned terrain or positionality (29; see also Nash 2014). Furthermore, she questions the implications of treating intersectionality as sacrosanct but also as a kind of authenticity test if not a stand-in for Black feminist theorizing—presently, historically, and into the future (2019, 2016).

While challenging us to think beyond too narrow a frame or too fixed a tale with regard to Black feminist theorizing writ large, Nash turns to some troubling aspects of contemporary intersectionality debates and scholarship. In particular, she questions “rescue plots” vis à vis intersectionality in women's studies (whereby intersectionality gets saved or rescued *and* the field is also rescued by intersectionality) (2019, 33–58). Here, racialized academic virtue politics, reverence, and the salvific can come together in disquieting ways, including performances of (white) feminists “saving” intersectionality's founding texts and scholars from critique and defending intersectionality from dilution and demise. Simultaneously, Nash confronts some of the affective binds of defensiveness, including what it means for Black feminist scholars to be expected to always defend (as in guard, preserve, and represent) intersectionality (133–8).

Though Nash and I have approached intersectionality differently, reading our work alongside, in juxtaposition down the length of duCille's axis of neglect/reverence, reveals layers of shared concerns. This is not to suggest that significant divergences, perhaps even harmful epistemic and affective dynamics, may also exist in spaces flanked by our work.⁵ Nonetheless (and not to brush these differences aside), as Nash explains, using a “framework of coalition” can reveal (unexpected) sites of “fundamental intimacy” (107).

For instance, we each find something deeply amiss with a range of interpretive patterns, narrative frames, and affective stances surrounding intersectionality—with intersectionality's ascribed plots (meaning, plots as in terrain but also narrative plots and their implications), that, together, help solidify the occult of intersectionality. In different ways, we challenge practices that render intersectionality at odds with some of its key premises. In addition, we both take up the politics of memory and, differently, call to divest from the violence of willful ignorance and structured forgetting.

Furthermore, Nash and I have questioned false divides placing Black and women of color feminist and transnational feminist work in opposition, pointing to how Black and women of color feminisms have long been engaged in global movements and alliances, politically and epistemologically (e.g., see Nash 2019, 105–10; May 2015, 201–7). As Nash eloquently underscores, too often, “intersectionality's histories, as retold in women's studies, have hinged

on a forgetting of transnationalism” (2019, 109). Interested in reading against the grain of this archival erasure in the making, she plumbs “the analytical, theoretical, and political possibilities of putting intersectionality and transnationalism side by side, mobilizing both analytics to think in supple ways about structures of domination and their deeply contingent meanings” (108).

More than a distortion that obfuscates, such binaries impede coalitional possibilities and enact epistemic and affective violence. Nash underscores, then, how coalitional ways of reading can help refute claims (erroneously) positing Black feminist and transnational feminist theorizing as opposed if not incompatible traditions.

8.6 Conclusion: in pursuit of being grounded and free

Thinking at the nexus of seemingly contrary (but twinned) dynamics laid out by duCille, *neglect* (to the point of erasure) and *respect* (to the point of adulation and exaltation if not fetishization), can pivot our energies from either/or absolutist assertions and practices to more coalitional, intimate thinking about intersectionality’s past(s), present(s), and future(s). Reading alongside, using a “both/and” intersectional way of thinking, and accounting for how seemingly opposite dynamics (neglect and care, dismemory and adulation) interrelate offers a generative interpretive strategy. This approach helps carve out some room to flesh out shared commitments, inhabit intimacies, and pinpoint overlaps in analytical and political goals without collapsing differences in context, argument, or history.

We must continue to insist on finding ways to read across the bounds of time, genre, and nation, to trace intersectionality’s different possibilities and genealogies, and, in so doing, use juxtaposition to read traditions alongside one another—to identify nodal points and intimacies without erasing distinctions, suppressing power asymmetries, or silencing critiques. In other words, we must aim to set aside reading in (false) opposition (though so much academic [and political] work is fueled by stark binaries). We also must combat the violence of dismemory, because, as Foreman underscores, “without structures of accountability that help produce the constancy and consistency needed to rebuff the creeping and often invisible replication of power, it continues, even when those of us who care deeply about these very issues are at the helm” (Foreman 2013, 313). Simultaneously, however, we must find ways to do so without resorting to the strictures of originalism, single-minded affective stances (e.g., defensiveness, care), and dysfunctional if not destructive rescue plots Nash urges us to abandon.

My hope is that Black and women of color feminist texts, histories, politics, and subjects can be remembered (not disremembered) and engaged with meaningfully, in terms of intersectionality’s historical and future trajectories, without adhering to stifling (textual, political, affective) fidelities marking off one, true (Black) feminist terrain and without animating oppressive and coercive (white feminist) economies of care. In short, I conclude this meditation with the hope that together (in coalition, not in sameness), we may map out and inhabit a middle ground and dwell in multiplicity, so as to be both grounded *and* free.

Notes

- 1 As Bonnie Moradi et al. (2020) said, “the picture that the citation network paints about the genealogy of intersectionality scholarship” is one of increasing “(in)visibility of women of color’s foundational ideas and activist work.” In addition, they document that “citation patterns also revealed lower citations to earlier activist-scholar work (1980s and before)” (162–3).
- 2 In her Afropessimist reading of intersectionality’s travels, uptake, and fungibility, Bilge also draws on and builds from Ann duCille’s 1994 analysis of the occult.

- 3 DuCille's unpacking of the occult, as a kind of false dualism constraining (and containing) Black feminist literary studies, can be interestingly placed in dialogue with Kimberlé Crenshaw's arguments about sameness/difference and hypervisibility/invisibility vis à vis Black women in law and in feminist theory (see Crenshaw 1989).
- 4 This is an interpretive and political dynamic that paradoxically echoes Crenshaw's careful analysis of Black women's simultaneous hypervisibility/invisibility in the law's either/or distortions of power, identity, and structure (see Crenshaw 1989).
- 5 For example, given my own positionality as a white scholar of Black feminist intellectual labors and histories, some of the troubling rescue narratives and coercive modes of "caring" for intersectionality that Nash delineates are frames into which my analyses of intersectionality's distortions and misuses (e.g., calling its name but used in ways that exacerbate inequality and violence against women of color, for instance—see May 2015) could be read. Reading Nash and my own work along duCille's razor-edged occult of true Black womanhood *qua* the occult of true (Black feminist) intersectionality requires confronting how my interpretive stance and commitments may be animating the epistemic inequality and deleterious affective economies Nash adroitly lays out.

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PART II

Intersectional methods and (inter)disciplinarity



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9

BEYOND INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES

Ten intersectional structural competencies for critical health equity research

Lisa Bowleg

“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” Remember the movie, *The Princess Bride* (Reiner 1987)? If so, you likely recognize this quote. In the movie, the word is “inconceivable,” but the quote could just as easily apply to the word “intersectionality.” This is the quote that always comes to mind when I hear researchers and researchers-in-training share their interest in applying intersectionality to health equity research, but then resort to conceptualizations of intersectionality that emphasize identity exclusively—“multiple intersecting identities,” “marginalized identities,” “stigmatized identities,” and the like—with no attention to interlocking systems of social-structural oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and cisgenderism (to name some).

A key posit of intersectionality, the broad-based knowledge project that is a field of study, a critical analytical framework, and a tool for critical praxis (Collins 2015), is that the individual-level experiences of people and communities who have been historically marginalized and oppressed based on their minoritized intersectional positions (e.g., racial/ethnic group, sexual, gender, disability, class) reflect interlocking systems and structures of power (Collins 1991; Crenshaw 1989). It is these systems and structures that disparately shape health outcomes for groups at historically marginalized intersections, *not* the intersectional identities in and of themselves. Without attending to this fundamental core tenet of intersectionality, researchers implicitly formulate intersectional identities as the *cause* of structural oppression and discrimination rather than the converse. Akin to the *racecraft* involved in formulations that in essence position “race” as the cause of racism (Fields and Fields 2012), “backwards formulations” (Coates 2017) such as these function to obscure the role of power in creating and bolstering interlocking racism, heterosexism, classism, and sexism (to name a few), and in turn, intersectional health inequities.

Attention to structure and power is foundational to intersectionality; it has always been. The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977), one of the first written articulations of intersectionality, explicitly delineated the oppressive structures that shaped the lives of Black lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women in the US:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of an integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that these major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions *creates* [italics added] the conditions of our lives.

(272)

Reflecting how integral structure is to intersectionality, prominent intersectionality and critical race theory scholar and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) invoked the term “structural intersectionality” (1245) 30 years ago to illustrate how racially discriminatory laws, policies, and practices in housing and employment, combined with “poverty, child care responsibilities and lack of job skills” (1245) reflected manifestations of intersectional race, gender, and class oppression, that in turn shaped the experiences and outcomes of poor women of color seeking access to battered women’s shelters in Los Angeles, California.

Intersectionality scholars routinely rail against the “flattening” of intersectionality as it travels through mainstream circles (see, e.g., Davis 2008; Collins 2015; Bowleg 2021). Vivian May (2015) in her excellent book on intersectionality devotes an entire chapter to the “slippage” and “flattening” of intersectionality; the myriad ways that attention to structural inequality, power, and social justice have been stripped from intersectionality. My vantage point as an associate editor at the *American Journal of Public Health* and frequent peer reviewer of intersectionality manuscripts submitted to SBS journals, combined with my frequent discussions about intersectionality research, provide a bird’s-eye view of what this flattening looks like in health equity research. It is also the impetus behind my new Intersectionality Training Institute (2021), a cross-disciplinary institute designed to help researchers catalyze health equity through training in the application of intersectionality to health research with fidelity to intersectionality’s principles; namely attention to interlocking power, structure, and social-structural oppression and discrimination.

To be fair, this inattention to structures rooted in oppressive social structures as fundamental causes of US health inequities is not limited to intersectionality researchers. Individualistic, biomedical, and psychosocial frameworks are the dominant (and often only) theoretical frameworks that most SBS researchers learn during their academic training. Opportunities to learn how to apply structural approaches and critical theoretical frameworks such as intersectionality and critical race theory (CRT) to SBS health equity research remain rare. Moreover, although scholars of color have long been committed to advancing theoretical and empirical knowledge about the role of oppressive social structures such as structural racism on health, high-impact academic journals have often ignored or rejected their work (Adkins-Jackson et al. 2021; McFarling 2021; Lett et al. 2021), required authors to colorblind or otherwise ignore racism (Wyatt 2021), or deemed the work acceptable only when headed by “health equity tourists,” white senior scholars with no prior engagement with these topics (Lett et al. 2021; McFarling 2021). Consequently, methodological strategies for research and interventions on structural racism in general, and intersectional social-structural oppression in particular, are inchoate.

Structural competency is the term that Metzl and Hansen (2014) coined to describe the:

trained ability to discern how a host of issues defined clinically as symptoms, attitudes, or diseases (e.g., depression, hypertension, obesity, smoking, medication “non-compliance,” trauma, psychosis) also represent the downstream implications of a number of upstream decisions about such matters as health care and food delivery systems, zoning

laws, urban and rural infrastructures, medicalization or even the very definition of illness and health.

(128)

Aimed at physicians and medical trainees, Metzl and Hansen assert the need for medical training to transcend conventional cultural understandings of individual patients and focus on structural factors that shape health outcomes beyond the level of the individual. The concept of structural competency is also highly relevant to SBS critical health equity researchers. Using Metzl and Hansen's structural competency paradigm as a foundation, I advance ten intersectional structural competencies for critical health equity research.

9.1 Ten intersectional structural competencies for critical health equity research

Applied to intersectional health equity research, intersectional structural competency is the trained ability to discern how most health inequities (e.g., COVID-19, HIV/AIDS, maternal morbidity and mortality) that disproportionately affect groups historically marginalized and oppressed at multiple intersectional positions are manifestations of interlocking oppressive social-structural systems, not simply individual-level social cognitions (e.g., attitudes, perceptions, beliefs) and behaviors, and certainly not just “intersectional identities.”

Metzl and Hansen (2014) propose five skill sets for developing structural competence in medical education training: (1) recognize the structures that shape clinical interactions; (2) develop an extra-clinical language of structure; (3) rearticulate “cultural” formulations in structural terms; (4) observe and imagine structural interventions; and (5) develop structural humility. In addition to adding five new competencies to this list, I have reorganized the competencies around three domains: (A) building capacity—general strategies to develop or enhance intersectional structural competence; (B) methodological considerations for operationalizing, measuring, and data analysis and interpretation; and (C) “critical intersectional praxis” (Collins 2015)—the bridging of intersectionality with action to reduce and eliminate intersectional health inequities (i.e., action) (Collins 2019).

9.1.1 Building capacity

9.1.1.1 Recognize the structures and interlocking oppressive social structures that shape health inequities

The first competency in Metzl and Hansen's (2014) paradigm encourages medical trainees to “recognize how economic, physical, and socio-political forces shape the medical decisions that people make” (128). The authors offer a useful vignette about Ms. Jones, a Black middle-aged woman who arrives late to her doctor's office appointment and refuses to take her blood pressure medication. Metzl and Hansen advise medical trainees to assess how structural factors such as health insurance and hospital policies might influence Ms. Jones's decisions.

Structural approaches are those that “locate the source of public health problems in the social, economic, and political environments that shape and constrain individual, community, and societal health outcomes” (Blankenship, Bray, and Merson 2000, S11). Like medical trainees, intersectional health equity researchers also need to learn how to recognize structures that shape health inequities beyond the level of the individual. The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly illustrated the limits of conceptualizing health and health inequities primarily as individual-

level problems, instead of structural problems such as household composition and health sector employment that are grounded in legacies of structural racism (Selden and Berdahl 2020).

Beyond recognizing structure, intersectional structural competency requires recognition of how interlocking social-structural power relations (e.g., structural racism, sexism, *and* heterosexism) grounded in legacies of structural racism shape health inequities for people of color at diverse intersectional positions. Critical race scholar Mari Matsuda's (1991) insightful "ask the other question" exercise offers a useful strategy for researchers seeking to assess or recognize interlocking oppressive social structures:

The way I try to understand the interconnections of all forms of subordination is through a method I call "Ask the other question." When I see something that looks racist, I ask "Where is the patriarchy in this?" When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, "Where is the heterosexism in this?" When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, "Where are the class interests in this?"

(1189)

9.1.1.2 Cultivate cross-disciplinary learning about structure and interlocking social-structural inequality

"Developing an extra-clinical language of structure" (Metzl and Hansen 2014, 129), the second component in Metzl and Hansen's framework, directs medical trainees to expand their focus beyond healthcare facilities to include cross-disciplinary understandings of structure relevant to illness and health. Likewise, SBS health equity researchers should also develop cross-disciplinary proficiency in how diverse disciplines and fields (e.g., sociology, social epidemiology, public health, anthropology, gender studies, economics) conceptualize structure and systems of social-structural oppression and discrimination, as well as related concepts such as structural racism (e.g., Bailey, Feldman, and Bassett 2021; Bailey et al. 2017), structural violence (e.g., Bluthenthal 2021; Godley and Adimora 2020), structural stigma (e.g., Hatzenbuehler 2016), and intersectional stigma (e.g., Berger 2004).

But whereas medical trainees presumably have limited engagement with theoretical SBS frameworks, the same is not true for most health equity researchers trained in the SBS. Throughout their undergraduate and graduate education, SBS researchers are exposed to a steady dose of psychosocial and biomedical theoretical frameworks that conceptualize health primarily as a property of individuals, and their thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors, with little or no attention to structure, much less interlocking systems of social-structural oppression (Weber and Parra-Medina 2003).

My structural competency has roots in my pre-doctoral work experience as a state HIV legislative policy analyst, and my master's work in public policy and women's studies, not my doctoral training in applied social psychology. The cross-disciplinary work of scholars such as Kim Blankenship (2000, 2018, 2006, 2021), a sociologist, and Nancy Krieger (2012, 2019, 1993), a social epidemiologist, has also been indispensable to my learning about structure. Blankenship's work led me to prominent sociologist C. Wright Mills' (1959) groundbreaking book, *The Sociological Imagination*. This classic is essential reading for health equity researchers interested in structural research. Thus, to build structural research proficiency, SBS critical health equity researchers must commit to independent cross-disciplinary learning beyond that of their home disciplines, and routinely read and integrate into their work relevant structural data from state, local, and federal government reports on topics such as employment (e.g., US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2021) and incarceration (e.g., Carson 2020). There is also a plethora of excellent con-

temporary books and articles that are required reading to advance and enhance knowledge about the history of structure and social-structural discrimination in the US. There are way too many excellent resources to list here, but some of my go-tos are: *The Case for Reparations* (Coates 2014), *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander 2010), *Evicted* (Desmond 2016), *The Color of Law* (Rothstein 2017), and more recently, *The Sum of Us* (McGhee 2021) and *The 1619 Project* (Hannah-Jones et al. 2021).

9.1.1.3 Develop intersectional structural humility

Metzl and Hansen's fifth structural competency focuses on the "trained ability to recognize the limits of structural competency" (131). Applied to SBS critical health equity research, intersectional structural competency describes the cultivation of humility about aspects such as: (1) the limitations of knowledge and expertise, particularly when researchers are not a member of the community(ies) they research and/or lack direct experience about what it means to experience intersectional oppression and discrimination; (2) the importance of engaging respectfully and equitably with and learning from community leaders and stakeholders with more in-depth knowledge about their communities than most researchers; (3) the need to be reflexive about how researchers' unexamined privilege and power might inadvertently harm more than help; (4) the humility to listen and learn, and sit with emotional and psychological discomfort when engaging with diverse communities and research participants; and (5) endeavoring to make visible the underrepresented communities (e.g., people with disabilities, Native Americans at all intersectional positions), experiences (e.g., Black cisgender and transgender women's experiences with police brutality [Crenshaw and Ritchie 2015]), and topics that are understudied such as exposure to structural racism *and* ableism (see e.g., The Harriet Tubman Collective 2017), and structural racism *and* cisgenderism (Lett, Dowshen, and Baker 2020). The onus is on intersectionally structurally competent researchers, not their community partners or participants, to recognize and be humble about what they don't know or need to know more about and which social-structural inequities (e.g., heterosexism, ableism) they may have overlooked, and remedy the oversights. Matsuda's "ask the other question" exercise is also apt here.

9.1.2 Methodological considerations

9.1.2.1 Resist identity-only conceptualizations of intersectionality

It's been more than two decades since Crenshaw (1991) explained: "Intersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity" (1244). Yet, identity, or in the intersectional formulation, "multiple identities," remains the identity-based conceptual rut that hobbles many intersectional health equity research projects. As a trained social psychologist, I recognize well that there are many research topics for which an intersectional identity-oriented approach is appropriate. This is not, however, the case with most intersectionality health equity research. Indeed, there are more problems than solutions with framing intersectionality exclusively through the prism of identity or even multiple identities.

I'll highlight just four. First, everyone has multiple intersecting identities. Intersectionality is not simply concerned with combinations of identities, but rather with what power and inequality structured around historically marginalized, minoritized, and oppressed intersectional positions reflect about social, economic, and health inequities. Two, many of the identities (e.g., racial/ethnic, gender, sexual and gender minority status, disability) of interest are socially constructed and thus not as solid as they seem. As Chibuihe Obi Achimba (2020), a gay man forced to flee his native Nigeria because of violent heterosexism, illustrated in a poignant *New York*

Times editorial, immigrating to the US meant confronting the “sad irony ... [of] trad[ing] one perilous identity—being gay in Nigeria—for yet another one: being a Black man in America.”

Third, identities ascribed to people (e.g., racial/ethnic group, sexual minority status) based on physical characteristics or mannerisms, do not always match people’s self-identifications. The concept of “*street race*,” the “race” that strangers assume people are based on physical characteristics (e.g., skin color, hair texture, facial features) highlights the gap between ascribed and perceived racial identities (López and Hogan 2021; López et al. 2017). Similar parallels exist for people perceived as sexual minorities who may not be or identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (i.e., “street sexuality”); or those perceived as having a gender identity that does not sync with their self-identified gender (i.e., “street gender”). Thus, centering intersectionality health equity research on people’s multiple identities invariably means constructing research on one of the most fluid and dynamic (and for purposes of reducing health equity, meaningless) variables imaginable.

Finally, a fourth and more consequential problem with identity-based intersectionality is that it implicitly locates the problem of health inequities within “identities” rather than intersecting oppressive structures and social processes *based* on those identities. The remedy for racialized health inequities is not to change the “race” of people oppressed by structural racism, it is to dismantle structural racism. Intersectionality quantitative researcher Greta Bauer’s (2014) observation about what’s at stake when health equity researchers prioritize intersectional identities over modifiable social-structural factors is deft: “Without an emphasis on intervenable processes or policies, a quantitative intersectionality [approach] focused purely on intersecting identities or positions would run the risk of continuing to reinforce the intractability of inequity, albeit in a more detailed or nuanced way” (12).

9.1.2.2 Collect demographic data to facilitate intersectional analyses

It seems so elementary as to not warrant mention, but to examine and intervene against the effects of interlocking social-structural inequality on health, researchers need to collect relevant data to facilitate their analyses. Not surprisingly, the collection of data and the reporting of it are intrinsically political (Krieger 1992). Data are vitally important to health equity because they provide a vital antidote to the “no data, no problem” conundrum (Krieger, 1992). Although data in and of themselves will not facilitate the social justice change that lies at the heart of intersectionality, without data “scientists and policy makers alike will be free to invoke their absence as an excuse for inaction” (Krieger 1992, 423).

In her most recent work on the importance of public health data, Krieger (2021) calls data collection to advance health equity a “double-edged sword.” The first edge is the “no data, no problem” issue, the obstruction of data to document injustice (e.g., the Trump Administration’s politically motivated failure to report COVID-19 incidence and prevalence by racial group); the second edge is the “problematic data, big problem” issue, the use of flawed data that exacerbates (e.g., errors in the reporting of counts [vs. rates] and the Type III errors that incorrectly reported that non-Latino white people, not Black people had disproportionately higher rates of COVID-19 deaths). Bolstering her assertion that “structural problems require structural solutions,” Krieger proposes two strategies for the federal collection and reporting of data on racialized groups: (1) explain in explicit terms and justify how racialized groups were conceptualized and categorized; and (2) analyze any individual-level racialized data within the context of relevant data about racialized societal inequities. This recommendation has relevance for all health equity research and can be further strengthened with an intersectional focus. Building on Krieger’s recommendation, researchers should explain and justify the conceptualization and categorization

of the collected demographic data at multiple intersections beyond just the single-axis category of “race.” That is, in addition to collecting data about racial/ethnic status and explicitly justifying, as Krieger recommends how it is conceptualized and categorized, data should be collected on: gender; gender minority status (Lett, Dowshen, and Baker 2020); sexual minority status (Sell and Becker 2001); disability; and socioeconomic position assessed at the individual, household, and neighborhood levels (Krieger, Williams, and Moss 1997).

9.1.2.3 Rearticulate demographics in terms of structure and the social-structural inequality they implicate

“Rearticulating ‘cultural’ presentations in structural terms” (130) is the third competency in Metzl and Hansen’s (2014) framework. The authors argue that medical training often relies on descriptions of differences in “cultural values” between physicians and patients, or people from different racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups, and obscures the structural barriers that produce and may better explain the health inequities observed in clinical settings. Returning to the earlier vignette of Ms. Jones, this competency invites questions about “social, infrastructural, or economic factors” (Metzl and Hansen 2014, 130) that may explain why Ms. Jones is tardy to her doctor’s appointments. In SBS health equity research, demographic variables such as “race,” sexual minority status, and class (often operationalized as individual annual income and level of education) are close proxies for cultural values in medical training. Demographics are routinely taken at face value (or controlled in statistical analyses to ensure that they do not confound the relationship between the independent and dependent variables) with little regard to the structures (e.g., zip code or US Census block, housing status, transportation access, education systems, incarceration, health insurance) and the vestiges of structural domination (e.g., slavery, Jim Crow segregation, voting bans) that they implicate.

As such, an obvious re-articulation of a demographic such as “race” [*sic*] is to explain any likely findings that show that racial/ethnic minority participants have worse health outcomes compared with white participants as being due to racism, not the biological fiction of race (Yudell et al. 2020; Graves Jr. and Goodman 2022). Thereafter, intersectional structural competency demands rearticulating interlocking demographics (e.g., racial/ethnic group and sexual minority) in terms of intersecting structures and oppressive social structures (e.g., structural racism *and* heterosexism).

Although designed primarily for the interpretation of intersectional qualitative data, Cuadraz and Uttal (1999), in an excellent article on intersectional data analysis, advance a two-step analytical process that also has implications for quantitative researchers analyzing the relationship between demographics and structure. They recommend asking separate questions about race, gender, and class (and so forth). In sync with my assertion that demographics implicate structure, Cuadraz and Uttal classify demographics as structure, not identity. They recommend asking, “How does racism inform this data?” In line with a more structural approach, I would slightly modify their question to ask: “How does *structural* racism inform this data?” to keep the focus on structural racism rather than interpersonal, internalized, or “perceived” [*sic*] racism. Then, depending on the study’s research questions and the extent to which the data are sufficiently intersectionally diverse or powered to facilitate inter-categorical analyses, I would pose other questions about the data such as: “How does structural heterosexism inform this data?” “How does structural sexism inform the data?” “How does ableism inform the data?” and so forth. The second step in Cuadraz and Uttal’s process involves analyzing the posed questions in relation to each other, and highlighting when each oppressive social structure ebbs and flows in relation to one another. This step “recognizes how at different points in individual lives, the structures

of domination have differential impact and salience, but do not disappear” (180). Thus, the task for intersectionally structurally competent researchers is to use a matrix (vs. single-axis) lens to frame and interpret demographic data, and to make manifest in analysis and interpretation how structures grounded in intersecting oppressive social structures, rather than demographics in and of themselves, shape inequitable health outcomes.

9.1.2.4 Examine structural racism as a core determinant of intersectional health inequities

Structural racism describes “the totality of ways in which societies foster [racial] discrimination, via mutually reinforcing [inequitable] systems (e.g., in housing, education, employment, earnings, benefits, credit, media, health care, criminal justice, etc.) that in turn reinforce discriminatory beliefs, values, and distribution of resources” (Bailey et al. 2017, 1455). Racism, as critical race theory posits, is embedded throughout laws, policies, practices, and institutions in the US, making it a routine and ordinary experience and exposure for people of color (Bell Jr. 1979; Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Closely allied with critical race theory, intersectionality offers no escape for white researchers seeking to avoid the discomfort of examining or discussing structural racism.

Put another way: it is simply not possible to conduct health equity research in which people of color in the US are the primary focus, or represented, without examining structural racism. And yet, as more SBS health equity researchers embrace intersectionality, many are conceptualizing it through a white racial frame that obscures structural racism (Bowleg 2019). Sociologist Joe R. Feagin (2013) defines the *white racial frame* as an “overarching White worldview that encompasses a broad and persistent set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions and reactions to language access, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate” (3).

Although structural racism is foundational to every aspect of life in the US, most conventional SBS research has conceptualized racism primarily as a property of individuals and cognitions (e.g., prejudice, bias, stereotypes), neglecting the “deep structural realities” of past and present racist oppression (Feagin 2013, 3). Intersectionality scholar Sirma Bilge (2014) has derided this whitening of intersectionality, clarifying that her definition of whitening intersectionality does not “refer to the race of intersectionality practitioners, but to the ways of doing intersectionality that rearticulate it around Eurocentric epistemologies” (16).

This whitening intersectionality is how we arrive at “intersectional” HIV prevention and treatment research conducted with multiracial/ethnic samples of sexual minority men that analyzes and interprets experiences almost exclusively through the prism of structural heterosexism, not the myriad ways that heterosexism intersects with structural racism and classism to produce starkly inequitable HIV outcomes for Black and Latino sexual minority men in the US. Not surprisingly (at least from an intersectionality perspective), four decades into the US HIV/AIDS epidemic, national HIV surveillance data documents decreases in new HIV cases for white sexual minority men, but not Black and Latino sexual minority men (Pitasi et al. 2021).

9.1.2.5 Measure intersectional discrimination structurally

Beyond inferring structure from individual or population-level demographic data lies a critical need to transcend individual-level measures of discrimination (Krieger 2020) and measure structural inequalities such as structural racism (Agénor et al. 2021; Adkins-Jackson et al. 2021), structural sexism, (Homan 2019, 2021), structural heterosexism (Hatzenbuehler, Keyes,

and Hasin 2009), and structural stigma (Hatzenbuehler 2016). A further challenge is to transcend the single-axis focus of structural discrimination measures and conceptualize and assess intersectional structural discrimination such as the intersectional effects of structural racism, sexism, and classism on Black women's disproportionate maternal morbidity and mortality. Moreover, as the recent publication dates of many of these studies evince, much of the work on measuring structural discrimination is inchoate, underscoring a need for intersectionally structurally competent researchers to help advance critical knowledge in this area.

Krieger's (2020) recent article on measuring racism, sexism, heterosexism, and cisgenderism in health research provides an excellent starting point for researchers interested in measures of structural discrimination for health equity research. The article includes tables that highlight study design considerations as well as sample structural measures used in health equity research. Given that the use of structural measures in health equity research remains in its infancy, Krieger concludes her article with an encouragement to readers "to join in the collective efforts to take on these challenges as one small part of the multifaceted, multisectoral work needed to advance health equity on a threatened planet" (53).

9.1.2.6 Measure, analyze, and interpret data on structure and intersecting social-structural inequality

In their quest to become intersectionally structurally competent, qualitative critical health equity researchers can rely on several exemplary resources to enhance their capacity to analyze and interpret structure and intersecting oppressive social structures in qualitative data (see for e.g., Abrams et al. 2020; Cuadraz and Uttal 1999; Bowleg 2008). But whereas scholarship on quantitative intersectional methodological approaches is flourishing (see for e.g., Else-Quest and Hyde 2016b, 2016a; Agénor 2020)—2021 brought the publication of *two* systematic reviews focused specifically on quantitative intersectional research methods (Bauer et al. 2021; Guan et al. 2021)—there is still a considerable dearth of scholarship about how to assess, analyze, and interpret structure and systems of social-structural oppression within quantitative intersectionality research beyond the level of the individual. As Agénor (2020) rightly notes, the handful of quantitative intersectionality population-health studies that exist have relied exclusively on interpersonal (and self-reported) measures of discrimination, not structural measures. Agénor's November 2019 search of the empirical literature for intersectional quantitative population health studies that investigated interlocking oppressive social structures was fruitless. This chasm underscores both the challenge and opportunities that exist for advancing methodological approaches to explicate the role and effects of interlocking social-structural inequality in quantitative intersectionality research. Adkins-Jackson and colleagues' (2021) recent and insightful article on structural racism research advances several quantitative analytical recommendations (e.g., integrating mixed data, using multilevel and multidimensional models such as structural equation models) that are likely to be useful for quantitative critical health equity researchers seeking to hone or enhance their intersectional structural competency.

These challenges notwithstanding, the absence of quantitative intersectional methodological approaches to empirically document the influence of structural and systems of interlocking social-structural oppression on health inequities does not obviate the need for intersectionally structurally competent critical health equity researchers (regardless of methodological approach) to make explicit in both the introduction and discussion of their work the interlocking "structural factors, social and historical processes and systems of oppression and power" (Agénor 2020, 806) that likely shape their data, results, and interpretations.

9.1.3 Praxis

9.1.3.1 Observe and imagine intersectional structural interventions

I've added the modifier intersectional to the term structural interventions but have otherwise retained Metzl and Hansen's (2014) fourth competency verbatim. This competency recognizes that "structures that shape health and illness are neither timeless nor immutable, but instead reflect specific financial, legislative, or indeed cultural decisions made at particular moments in time" (130). More than two decades ago, Blankenship and colleagues (2000), in a visionary article titled "Structural Interventions in Public Health," defined structural interventions as those that sought to "alter the content within which health is produced or reproduced" (S11).

Since then, a steady stream of HIV researchers have led calls for more structural interventions to address health inequities such as HIV/AIDS (Adimora and Auerbach 2010; Sipe et al. 2017; Shriver, Everett, and Morin 2000; Blankenship et al. 2006), and more recently, COVID-19 (Bowleg 2020). These calls notwithstanding, critical gaps persist about how to develop and systematically evaluate the impacts and implementation of structural interventions (Blankenship et al. 2006). Nor are these the only challenges; others include: (1) the lack of a common framework and research on mechanisms; (2) the need for better measurements and methods; (3) the need for more rigorous structural intervention designs; (4) limited funding for structural interventions; (5) shifting policy, funding, and political priorities, and a propensity for shorter engagement than essential longer-term investment; and (6) gaps in dissemination and implementation such as sustainability, scalability, and replicability (Brown et al. 2019). Consequently, most public health interventions remain individually and interpersonally focused (Brown et al. 2019), despite the promise of structural interventions for delivering cost-effective, long-term, and broader impact solutions (Adimora and Auerbach 2010; Sipe et al. 2017; Shriver, Everett, and Morin 2000). There is also a dire need for more antiracist (Williams and Mohammed 2013) and intersectional structural interventions to reduce health inequities.

Observing structural interventions. Whether observed or regarded as such, there are structural interventions that have dramatically reduced racialized health inequities. Among the most recent is the Affordable Care Act implemented by President Barack Obama in 2014 (often called Obamacare). The ACA significantly narrowed gaps in un-insurance rates in US states that expanded Medicaid to include low-income adults (39 states and the District of Columbia have done so). This substantially decreased racialized inequities in insurance: a decline of 51 percent between Black and white adults, and 45 percent between Latino and non-Latino white adults (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 2020). Further underscoring the need for intersectional approaches within structural interventions, attention to structural racism, and the importance of multilevel (e.g., structural and interpersonal) interventions, empirical evidence from HIV prevention research documents that even without the barrier of health insurance, intersectional health inequities persist. There is empirical evidence that despite having health insurance, Black and Latino sexual minority men were significantly less likely than their white counterparts to have lower awareness, access, and uptake of PrEP (Preexposure Prophylaxis, an effective HIV prevention medication) (Kanny et al. 2019).

Imagining structural interventions. The challenges of structural interventions notwithstanding, there are opportunities for critical health equity researchers to hone their intersectional structural competency about the utility of imagining structural interventions. Here, I echo Metzl and Hansen's (2014) recommendations for training programs to infuse education about structural interventions into the curriculum, classroom presentations, seminars and colloquia, and written assignments. Even in the absence of these, critical health equity researchers can begin to flex their competency by reflecting on and discussing the applied implications (and challenges) of inter-

sectional structural interventions. Consider the exemplar of the Greensboro Health Disparities Collaborative (GHDC) (2021) and its mission to “establish structures and processes that respond to, empower and facilitate communities in defining and resolving issues relative to disparities in health,” and commitment to antiracism and community-based participatory research (CBPR; Stern 2021). Informed by GHDC’s CBPR tenets, a partnership of academic researchers and the cancer center at Cone Health, a regional multi-hospital community health system, collaborated on the Accountability for Cancer Care through Undoing Racism and Equity (ACCURE) project, an intervention to reduce racial inequities in cancer treatment and survival rates among patients in Greensboro. The intervention used a real-time registry based on electronic health records (EHR) of patients who had missed their cancer treatment appointments or cancer care milestones; it also included patient navigators and clinical feedback (Cykert et al. 2020).

Recognizing that transportation problems are not randomly structured in Greensboro, but rather are rooted in structural racism, notably the history of redlining and residential segregation that explains why the predominantly Black residents lack the economic resources of their white counterparts who live just miles away (Marquez 2021), Cone Health developed a transportation hub to provide transportation to patients with limited access to their appointments. The impressive results underscore the value of recognizing the role of structure rooted in historical legacies of structural racism and the transformative power of structural interventions to eliminate racialized health inequities. The transportation hub resulted in a dramatic decline in previous “no-show” rates from 12 percent and 15 percent for patients who lived in the two zip codes with the highest inequities, to 1.2 and 1.3 percent respectively. Moreover, overall survival increased for all patients who completed their recommended cancer treatments, *eliminating* prior Black–white survival disparities (Stern 2021).

Although the ACCURE and Cone Health transportation hub interventions were single-axis (i.e., focused exclusively on the axis of “race”) rather than intersectional, they nonetheless offer opportunities to imagine similar intersectional structural interventions. For example, an intersectional modification of the ACCURE EHR registry could require an intersectional examination of EHR records for patients intra-categorically (e.g., Black cisgender women vs. men; Latino heterosexual vs. sexual minority people, Native American cisgender vs. non-binary people) and/or inter-categorically (e.g., Latino vs. white sexual minority men) to assess differences in treatment and survival rates. A follow up step might include interviewing patients to get more in-depth and intersectionally specific insights about key barriers (e.g., food insecurity, intersectional stigma/discrimination from health care providers) to inform the implementation and evaluation of structural and/or multilevel interventions to reduce the inequities.

It bears noting too that many of the challenges to structural interventions are structural (e.g., the lack of formal training and funding). As such, there are also opportunities for institutions to help build capacity in both structural and intersectional structural interventions. For example, academic journals can require authors to discuss the structural intervention implications of their research. Funders of health research can fund training programs to build proficiency in structural development, implementation, and evaluation, and fund more structural intervention research with the recognition that by necessity, funding cycles for such programs will have to exceed the typical three-to-five-year funding timeframe (Brown et al. 2019).

Finally, it bears imagining the possibility of a variety of structural interventions such as the expansion of voting rights, universal basic income, paid sick leave, paid parental leave, and universal health insurance that have the potential to dramatically improve health and wellbeing and reduce intersectional health inequities beyond researchers’ smaller-scale studies. Aligned with intersectionality’s commitments to social justice and praxis (Collins 2015; Collins and Bilge 2020), intersectionally structurally competent health equity researchers are committed to having

their research inform structural and multilevel interventions, but also recognize that researchers' individual and collective political activism and voting choices are likely the most consequential structural interventions for health equity.

9.2 Towards intersectional structural competency: conclusion

In line with the axiom that “structural problems require structural solutions” (Krieger 2021), intersectional structural competency harnesses the radical potential of intersectionality as critical praxis (Collins 2015). Intersectionality’s power as a critical analytical framework for health equity research—and in turn, health equity—lies not in its ability to replicate conventional identity-based explanations for health inequities, albeit with a more sophisticated, complex, and nuanced take (Bauer 2014). Rather, as with other critical and structural approaches to health equity, intersectionality’s strength rests in its ability to leverage empirical knowledge “to deepen understanding of how injustice shapes population health [for people and communities at diverse intersections], for whose benefit at whose expense; to contest narratives that naturalize inequities; and to generate evidence for accountability” (Krieger 2020, 47), and to inform the development of structural and multilevel interventions to transform and disrupt inequitable systems.

I started with a reflection on meaning, and I end there. Ultimately, it is the use of intersectionality as a social justice and resistance project (Collins 2019; Collins and Bilge 2020) to achieve intersectional health equity—not the investigation of multiple intersectional identities—that best defines the meaning of intersectionality and what it means to be an intersectionally structurally competent health equity researcher.

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10

WAVES AND RIPTIDES

Mapping intersectionality's currents in feminist psychology

Patrick R. Grzanka and Elizabeth R. Cole

10.1 Introduction: the uptake hypothesis

In the past 15 or so years, a particular framing of the origins of intersectional inquiry has taken shape in the psychological literature: one in which intersectionality was developed by scholar-activists outside the discipline, and then imported, seemingly whole-cloth, to be deployed by psychologists in research and practice. Often this narrative describes the concept of intersectionality in spatial terms, invoking metaphors that emphasize the distance between intersectionality and the discipline. Intersectionality “travels” from Black feminist activism (Del Rio-Gonzalez et al. 2021, 33), or “represents a new frontier” (Else-Quest and Hyde 2016, 155) where empirical approaches have “lagged behind” (Shields 2008, 301). Even those who observe that intersectionality offers a necessary critique of research and practice in psychology discuss limits to how the concept can be “incorporated” into the discipline (Overstreet et al. 2020, 785) as though a theory can come to be absorbed into a larger whole.

In what we're calling the “uptake narrative,” intersectionality arrived in psychology and began to be subsumed into the discipline starting in the 2000s and is marked by special issues of psychology journals and attendant controversies over the uses (and sometimes abuses) of intersectionality in and beyond feminist psychology (e.g., Grzanka 2018; McCormick-Huhn et al. 2019; Rutherford and Davidson 2019). This account has some empirical validity. Indeed, the term intersectionality did not start to appear in psychology's academic journals until the late 1990s (e.g., Henderson 1997) and then exploded particularly in response to the 2008 special issue of *Sex Roles*, which was interdisciplinary in scope but dominated by feminist psychologists, and the 2009 paper on intersectionality in *American Psychologist* (Cole 2009). The uptake narrative is consistent with what Nash (2018) called “the intersectionality wars,” including concerns about how intersectionality has traveled across disciplinary boundaries and been met by opposition from various political orientations (King 2015), defensiveness over its perceived dilution and misappropriation (Carbado 2013), and the displacement of Black women as both producers of intersectionality scholarship and the subjects of intersectional inquiry (Alexander-Floyd 2012). In psychology, the uptake narrative has been calcified by high-profile publications and critiques that have identified psychological research as especially ripe for the reduction of intersectionality into a methodological quagmire rather than a substantive epistemic critique

(Warner et al. 2016), political project (Grzanka 2020), and far-reaching paradigm for transformational psychological inquiry and activism (Cole 2008; Overstreet et al. 2020).

But what does the uptake narrative reveal and obscure? Critical social and political psychologists have noted that narrative plays an important role in the construction of identity (including disciplinary identities) and reveals “the ideological and experiential content of memory, as well as the *motivational anchor* for a set of social practices” (Hammack and Pilecki 2012, 77, emphasis added). If the uptake narrative is functional, what work does it do to tell the story of intersectionality in psychology? “Uptake” denotes, on the one hand, the arrival of intersectionality into psychology at a particular moment in time and suggests that intersectionality is not *of* psychology but from *elsewhere*. On the other hand, the semantic implications of the uptake narrative are consistent with Collins’s (2019) critique of intersectionality’s treatment by scholars as a kind of proprietary object: a thing to be known, used, and even profited from, instead of a critical social theory intended to support anti-subordination projects or an intellectual-activist movement.

What if we imagined psychology’s uptake narrative to be more of a hypothesis than historical truth? Foucault’s (1978) classic treatment of Victorian repression in the history of sexuality is a useful precedent for such an analytic move. The “repressive hypothesis” argues that the history of sexuality in the West is one of progressively intensive and culturally pervasive silencing, prohibition, and restriction of sexuality. Foucault ultimately rejected the hypothesis. Instead, he advocated for an understanding of the discourse on sexuality in Western modernity to be one of multiplication: a veritable explosion of sex and sexualities through institutions of education, medicine, criminal justice, and psychology, among others. The repressive hypothesis, Foucault argued, is a diversionary tactic, one that aids in a simple narrative construction in which power functions unilaterally and negatively. It is not that sexuality has not been repressed, according to Foucault, but that it has also been produced, expanded, compelled, and spoken about ad infinitum, particularly by those who seek to know it and control it. The inconvenient truth is a bit more complicated.

Accordingly, we suspect that the uptake hypothesis may be a reductive account of intersectionality’s relationship to, with, and in psychology (cf. Rutherford and Pettit 2015). What does mapping the terrain of intersectionality in psychology look like if we think beyond its early formal articulations and citations of Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and instead take Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall’s (2013) advice that intersectionality scholarship is best characterized and evaluated by what it does rather than what it calls itself? How do a range of narrative practices, including the proprietary logic described by Collins (2019) and the defensive stance taken by those Nash (2016) called feminist originalists, obfuscate a nonlinear and multifarious narrative of intersectionality in psychology?

One major challenge to the uptake hypothesis is a recent citation analysis of transdisciplinary intersectionality studies (Moradi et al. 2020), which showed that psychology constitutes the second largest cluster of intersectionality scholarship in terms of highly influential publications. More than simply taking up intersectionality, psychologists (and those who publish in psychology journals) have engaged intersectionality through the production of an enormous amount ($n = 3,895$) of (widely cited) scholarship (Moradi et al. 2020), including ideas about what it is (e.g., a paradigm, a framework), what it is not (e.g., a heuristic, a testable theory), and how to realize its potential for generating knowledge in the service of social change toward equity and justice. Citations of papers in the psychology cluster of publications cut across virtually all the other clusters, suggesting that psychological discourse on intersectionality is not marginal or closed, but better characterized as expansive, inclusive, and influential beyond the boundaries of disciplinary psychology. Thus, it’s worth taking a closer look at how intersectionality has taken shape within psychology.

In this chapter, we adopt the longstanding and contested metaphor of waves (Hewitt 2010) and their study to trace early instantiations of intersectionality theory through contemporary understandings of the concept throughout psychology, albeit with a focus on feminist psychology. We acknowledge that the image of waves as it has been used to describe feminist movements is an imperfect fit with intersectionality's development in psychology. In our reading, we do not view the use of intersectionality as surging and later receding, for example. And we do not invoke the imagery of waves to imply they represent sequential or mutually exclusive eras of intellectual or activist thought. Indeed, the image of (ocean) waves has been critiqued for its limitations as a way to describe feminist movement and the way this framing obscures the work of multiracial feminists (Thompson 2002). However, we believe the wave metaphor, with its attention to periodization, zeitgeist, and coalescence of political priorities, can facilitate a critical genealogical examination of intersectionality's travels and transformations in psychology, as well as in other disciplines. We invoke the various meanings of waves as metaphors purposefully here, thinking about oceanic waves, riptides, and acoustics—specifically the branch of physics devoted to the study of sonic waves, the principles of which can be applied to waves of all kinds. Rather than ossify a specific metaphorical framework for envisioning intersectionality's movements in psychology, as if various epistemologies can be characterized simply as building, cresting, crashing, and receding in succession, we want to think about waves as a critical heuristic for examining how intersectionality has been used to produce intersectional projects (i.e., things that are worth approaching intersectionally) over time and, more specifically, the subjects of intersectional analyses. Our project here is accordingly twofold. First we aim to “recast” (Thompson 2002) feminist accounts of intersectionality in psychology in the interest of destabilizing the uptake hypothesis and thus uncovering what ideas, publications, and authors it conceals. Second, we hope to invite critical reflection on how the epistemic wakes of these waves influence how psychologists and other practitioners of intersectionality studies conceptualize, deploy, and change intersectionality to meet disciplinary and political goals in the study and contestation of social inequality.

10.2 Psycho-acoustics

Scholars have offered cartographies or genealogies of intersectionality's movement beyond the foundational publications (Grzanka 2019; Hancock 2016; May 2015). Analyses of citation networks demonstrate that as intersectionality moved into academic disciplines, it “did not spread like an oil stain, evenly and outward from a single center. Instead the trail shows multiple centers and local webs” (Keuchenius and Mügge 2021, 364). Separate analyses of citation networks (Keuchenius and Mügge 2021; Moradi et al. 2020) showed that within the network of psychology scholars, the psychological scholarship cluster is characterized by questions of methodology and empirical investigations, with particular attention to the experience of minoritized and stigmatized identities. Based on her own readings, Collins (2015) identified six themes characterizing the scholarship that uses intersectionality as an analytic strategy, including questions of identity and methodology, themes that emerged in the network analyses as preoccupations of the psychology cluster. These explorations suggest that rather than directly “taking up” intersectionality from writings in other disciplines and interdisciplines, psychologists have cultivated a vibrant and relatively large body of intersectional scholarship linked by flows of citation and conversation. Yet these analyses do not address how the understanding and deployment of intersectionality have evolved over time within this community.

Narrative reviews, content analyses, and systematic analysis of the state of intersectionality studies in psychology today produce a fairly sobering account of intersectionality's place in the

discipline of psychology. Whether lamenting intersectionality's almost complete absence in a subfield (Santos and Toomey 2018) or documenting its facile deployment in a given area (Shin et al. 2017), prominent feminist psychologists tend to assess the ways intersectionality has been invoked—including both its popularity and its marginalization—with a sense of disappointment, if not exactly the defensiveness of Nash's (2016) so-called “originalists.” An “invisible college” (cf. Ansara and Hegarty 2012) of citation networks and call-and-response is traceable across the past decade among feminist psychologists who advocate increased adoption of intersectional perspectives but simultaneous concerns about its dilution (Warner et al. 2016), misappropriation (Bowleg 2008), and mischaracterization (Grzanka 2018), not to mention the erasure of Black women in intersectional psychology (Cole 2020). We (the authors) are both members of this invisible college, though we occupy different and overlapping social positions (one a Black biracial straight woman and one a white queer man, both cisgender, able-bodied, and tenured, although of two different generations). Just as important to the present discussion, we routinely critique the field we publish in and our work can also be understood, at times, to be engaging and producing the prevailing themes we identify here (e.g., Grzanka 2020) and, at other times, resisting them (e.g., Cole 2008). The intellectual contributions of this invisible college—more accurately, the discourse produced by this group of scholars—highlights the contemporary currents that perhaps constitute recent waves of intersectionality in psychology and offer a bridge back to earlier works that might undermine the tidiness of the uptake hypothesis.

What proceeds is our identification of intersectional waves in psychology and is driven by what we are calling a “feminist acoustic analysis.” Though colloquially associated with sound waves audible to the human ear, acoustics refers more broadly to the branch of physics devoted to the study of mechanical waves as they move through gases, liquids, and solids. Acoustics provides analytic substance to the visual metaphor of waves, because acoustics are concerned with how waves *affect the mediums through which they travel*. Inspired by Ahmed's (2006) ethnography of texts, in which one “follows around” texts as they move through discourse, our investigation of whether and how intersectionality's construction in psychology formed coherent, structured/structural movements can be understood as a *feminist acoustic analysis*. Like a mechanical wave, how have waves of intersectionality propagated energy in specific domains of psychology, and have these effects been harmonic and/or chaotic?

As we began working on this project in 2020, we contacted over 15 feminist psychologists to ask them their thoughts on our formulation of the waves and for insight on influential works about intersectionality in psychology that preceded Crenshaw's earliest papers on the topic. We did this to increase the fidelity and validity of our work, because any accounting of these waves should understand them in the context of conversations taking place in a community. Just as traditional acoustic inquiry reconciles the simultaneous coexistence of multiple mechanical waves, our analysis works nonlinearly at times to highlight the extent to which dominant themes in intersectional psychology have overlapped, repeated, and diverged over the past 30 years. We work backwards, purposefully, from the prolific and vibrant state of the subfield today, in order to trace the vibrations of the uptake narrative back to their source, identifying the themes that were precursors to the preoccupations of scholars in this, the fourth decade after Crenshaw's foundational paper (1989) put a name to this area of inquiry and analysis.

10.3 The methods wave (2008–present)

The most recent wave of intersectionality discourse in psychology was marked by the 2008 special issue of *Sex Roles* on intersectionality (edited by social psychologist Stephanie Shields) and signified a preoccupation with methods. Despite earlier attention to intersectional methods

and methodology both within and outside the discipline (Dill 1979), this special issue became a widely referenced milestone in the disciplinary conversation about how psychologists should use intersectionality. Although Bowleg (2008) warned in that issue about the perils of applying positivist principles to intersectional questions, especially the search for an allegedly “perfect” intersectional question, much of the past dozen or so years of intersectionality research in psychology reflects a dogged focus on methods to measure, test, and quantify concepts and questions related to intersectionality. On the one hand, this is unsurprising. Psychologists are mostly quantitative scientists and they convert constructs into variables which can be measured (i.e., behaviors, thoughts, feelings). On the other hand, some of the discourse on intersectional methods reveals assumptions about intersectional phenomena that are orthogonal to earlier theorizing about intersectionality by scholars working in other disciplines and contexts and even, as we will discuss later, foremothers working in psychology.

First, the methods wave subtly displaces the strong social constructionist thrust of canonical intersectionality scholarship (Collins 2000, 2000; May 2015) and suggests that the “complexity of intersectionality” (McCall 2005) can be captured by sufficiently sophisticated scientific tools, including those inherited from positivist traditions (Else-Quest and Hyde 2016). For example, quantitative social scientists often attempt to capture differences among groups defined by multiple axes of identity by testing whether the effect of one identity on an outcome differs according to another identity (e.g., does the salutary effect of gender on salary differ for men depending on whether they are white or of a minoritized race?) This testing for statistical *interaction effects* to compare groups defined by social identities is prevalent in psychology yet some contest whether it is a legitimate form of intersectional analysis, because many approaches to testing interactions position social identities as variables as having discrete and independent effects (e.g., testing for whether gender has an effect that is *independent* of race, as though any individual has a gender without also having a race) rather than as mutually constituted (Lewis and Grzanka 2016). However, psychologists have struggled to identify alternatives to interactions (and their cousin, moderation analysis) even as myriad advanced tools and procedures have been proposed (Else-Quest and Hyde 2016; Hankivsky and Grace 2015). This focus on methods almost always is in lieu of attention to capturing the social practices that construct difference and create inequalities associated with identities. To paraphrase Bowleg (2008), the notion that perfecting methods will yield greater dividends in intersectional analyses suggests that the job of intersectional psychology is to “reveal” rather than construct or co-create the empirical world.

Second, the methods wave is characterized by a multiplication of instrumentation and specific analyses by which to measure particular intersectional phenomena and particular multiply marginalized groups that focus almost exclusively on the measurement of inter-group differences, rather than similarities (e.g., Scheim and Bauer 2019). Certainly this approach is indispensable for identifying inequities, a critical first step toward mitigating them. However, the fact that this approach dominates this most recent wave of intersectional psychology scholarship is especially meaningful given that other intersectional work, particularly in the Black feminist tradition, underscores the importance of identifying common interests to form coalitions (Cole 2008) and of identifying similarities across groups (Cole 2009; Cole and Stewart 2001). The reduction of intersectionality to a question of methods and measurement within the paradigmatic context of early 21st-century psychology means a search for differences that privileges analyses and tests over politics and justice (Bowleg and Bauer 2016; Grzanka and Cole 2021), or at least imagining the political and justice implications of intersectionality are just that: *implications*, rather than motivations or aims in and of themselves. This is what Grzanka and Miles (2016) called psychology’s “epistemic riptide.” They argued that psychologists’ attempts to create

and use knowledge based on intersectionality frameworks are always pulled back to psychology's key unit of analysis: the individual.

We extend this notion and observe that the implications of such a riptide are multifaceted, particularly when talking about waves of intersectionality. Another key element of the riptide is its capacity to drag intersectional inquiry back toward a focus on dominant groups, i.e., college student samples at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). So even when minoritized or stigmatized populations are studied, psychologists tend to articulate their mattering in terms of comparison to dominant groups; for example, in Grzanka and Miles's study, the extent to which LGBT people of color *are different* from prototypical LGBT people (i.e., white cisgender gay men). Intrinsicly tied to the emphasis on differences is the impulse to categorize. As such, psychology's epistemic riptide privileges categorization as a way of knowing because categorization—including social categories (e.g., “at-risk” or “underprivileged”) constructed by researchers rather than inductively or empirically derived from communities—is necessary to implement the mandate of comparing groups. From this perspective, intersectionality's deployment as a tool for intercategory analysis (McCall, 2005) is not incidental but rather the predictable outcome of the way intersectionality has come to be understood in the discipline.

McCall's tremendously cited 2005 paper¹ serves as a useful bridge for thinking about the relationship between what we have identified as the methods wave and its predecessor, which was focused on identities. As many readers will undoubtedly be familiar, McCall famously distinguished intersectional analyses in terms of how they treat categories. Her tripartite framework—published in *Signs*, arguably the flagship women's studies journal—differentiates between intersectional analyses that identify and destabilize social categories (*anticategorical*); approaches that look within categories for variations and similarities (*intracategorical*); and analyses that provisionally adopt categories and examine differences between them (*intercategorical*). Reception of McCall's model across the disciplines warrants its own treatment for what it reveals about academic approaches to intersectionality. Here, we offer a limited observation from psychology about how McCall's work mirrors currents in psychology and the privileging of quantitative methodology throughout most social sciences. It is unfair to attribute problems in intersectional psychology to McCall's work, but her influential paper is helpful for considering how methodological investments in certain kinds of analyses come to influence not only what designs are valued and which tests are conducted, but the kinds of participants and groups that come to constitute the corpus of published research on intersectionality.

McCall's (2005) intercategory analyses facilitated a rediscovery and claiming of what was already known, something we might call “epistemological Columbusing” when it comes to intersectionality. Because quantitative psychologists are quite adept at measuring interactions among independent variables, including membership in various social groups and positions, intercategory intersectionality—which goes by a variety of different names (e.g., “interactional”; see Lewis and Grzanka 2016)—provided a way of talking about intersectionality that made it seem like psychologists had been “doing” intersectionality all along. Further, since most psychologists are not trained in epistemology, much less postmodern or poststructural theory² (Warner et al. 2016), McCall's delineation of anticategorical analysis is essentially meaningless to those who use categories to conduct virtually all their analyses. Consequently, McCall attributes the development of anticategorical approaches to humanities scholars and philosophers, such as Judith Butler, whose work may influence certain strands of psychology but has little to no bearing on how even psychologists of gender might conduct quantitative inquiry.

Finally, intracategorical analysis, that is, investigations of within-group complexity among a multiply marginalized group, is perhaps the most important part of the paper. Intracategorical inquiry focuses on the experiences of intersectionality within (non-prototypical) categorical

groups, such as Black women, and as such facilitates understanding of these groups on their own terms, rather than relying on constructs originating in the study of hegemonic groups. Although this approach is especially useful for helping psychologists think beyond what Cole and Stewart (2001) called “invidious comparisons,” intracategorical analysis appears to be largely marginalized in the psychological literature that represents its conceptual framework as explicitly intersectional. For example, among the 15 published papers that use the word intersectionality in the top-ranked *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* as of July 2021, none took an intracategorical approach. The marginalization of intracategorical inquiry is not politically neutral or inconsequential. Among McCall’s three approaches, intracategorical analyses look within social categories for dimensions of oppression and privilege, rather than against categories (anticategorical) or between them (intercategorical). Ultimately, the sidelining of intracategorical work in psychological research on intersectionality comes to reproduce what Alexander-Floyd (2012) called a disappearing act: with the failure to take up and refine psychological analyses beyond multi-group comparisons, noncomparative studies of multiply marginalized social groups are deprioritized. The implication, once again, is that, ironically, intersectionality is not a tool to study the experiences of Black women, or even that they are unworthy of study on their own if there isn’t a group with which to compare them.³

In and of themselves, inter-group comparisons reveal nothing about how inequities—in resources, power, and even epistemological credibility (Settles et al. 2020)—associated with gender, sexuality, and race and other axes of difference act in concert to construct lived experiences within minoritized groups (cf. Sabik et al. 2021). In other words, comparative approaches misunderstand intersectionality as describing who people *are*, when it was intended as a way to conceptualize what meaningful social distinctions *do* (Collins 2019). Intersectionality was never just or even principally a theory of identities (Carbado 2013; MacKinnon 2013). And yet as Crenshaw recently observed, some strands of intersectionality’s applications today look like “identity politics on steroids” (qtd. in Steinmetz 2020). This brings us to themes that took precedence earlier in this literature, which we call the “identities wave.”

10.4 The identities wave (2000–present)

In 2017, in the pages of the top-ranked journal of counseling psychology, Grzanka and Moradi (2017) called for a moratorium on the phrase “intersecting identities.” The term had become so ubiquitous in counseling psychology that one would think intersectionality research was the new hegemonic norm. And yet, as Shin and colleagues (2017) found, the vast majority of intersectionality research in counseling psychology—or, more accurately, research that purported to take an intersectional approach—was what Dill and Kohlman (2012) had termed “weak intersectionality,” or the uncritical analysis of multiple dimensions of identity, that is, without attention to power, exclusion, or inequality. But how did psychology get there, to the point at which “intersecting identities” had become such a vacant phrase as to drive experts in the field to advocate for its wholesale abandonment? Although part of the reason for the arrival of the methods wave was the “problem” of identities in intersectional psychology (as if methods would help us figure it out), the answer lies as much in epistemology as it does in methods (Warner et al. 2016).

At the turn of the 21st century, Deaux and Stewart (2001) published a notable invocation of intersectionality in the agenda-setting *Handbook of the Psychology of Women*. In “Framing Gendered Identities,” they extended an ongoing conversation in feminist social psychology about the necessity of considering the role of race, class, sexuality, and other dimensions of inequality when studying gender. They posited “gendered identities” as encompassing three

key principles: “historical and cultural context, intersectionality, and negotiation” (Deaux and Stewart 2001, 85). Consistent with Fassinger and Arseneau’s (2007) elaboration of identity “enactment” as a model for thinking about the intersectionality of sexual and gender minority identities in the *Handbook of Counseling and Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients*, Deaux and Stewart’s proposal reflected several established principles of intersectionality (Collins 2019): an emphasis on context, the co-constitution of systems of inequality, and the dynamic nature of both these systems and their attendant identities (i.e., race, class). However, in the years that followed, intersectionality’s interpolation in psychology came to emphasize less the contextual and dynamic nature of intersecting systems and more the multidimensional nature of social identities that had previously been largely neglected in psychological inquiry.

Several critics have documented and theorized the prevalence of an identitarian shift in intersectionality discourse in psychology, including its epistemic and political implications. As we noted above, Shin and colleagues (2017) systematically accounted for intersectionality research in the two top journals of counseling psychology through 2016 and found a dramatic rise in the number of papers invoking intersectionality was not actually accompanied by an intersectional analysis. In these journals, intersectionality was invoked to denote that participants and/or clients possessed multiple social identities—typically multiple marginalized identities (Shin et al. 2017). Fewer papers took Dill and Kohlman’s (2012) “strong” intersectionality approach, that is analyses which treat identities and systems in relation to each other, and even fewer took a “transformative” intersectional approach, expressly considering social justice a goal or outcome of research activities.

Ten years after Fassinger and Arseneau (2007) implored LGBT psychologists to consider intersectionality and cultural context as central to the experiences of sexuality and gender expression, Moradi (2017) similarly observed that intersectionality had largely become—at least among psychologists—a way of talking about identities, rather than axes of difference and systemic inequity. As Balsam (2017) observed, “This gentrified framing of intersectionality erodes its power to help us transform our research, our practice, and ultimately our society.” Grzanka and Miles (2016) studied psychotherapy training videos for therapists working with LGBT clients and found that the construction of LGBT issues in professional psychology turned, at least in these videos, upon an understanding of intersectionality as foremost an issue of identity. Within the larger context of neoliberalism, “intersecting identities” emerged as an *intersectionality-lite* way of thinking about LGBT people in social context: mental health issues were framed as issues of multiple social identities, and the key to improving LGBT mental health was to understand these issues in terms of identity. Of course, social identities are important elements of social life and can be especially salient for those situated at various axes of oppression; this focus on identities is not in and of itself reflective of “weak” intersectionality. But Grzanka and Miles situated these training videos in the context of paradigm shifts in psychology, including what they documented as the rise of LGBT-affirmative therapy that privileged identity affirmation above and beyond structural analyses of how LGBT identities come to matter (i.e., through processes including marginalization, stigma, discrimination, violence), much less the social and historical forces that produce certain things as “LGBT issues.” In this decontextualized framing, it is no surprise that the concerns of the most privileged group members, in this case those who are white, affluent, and cisgender, are at the center. Returning again to Balsam (2017), “as we have progressed, we have done so at a cost to those who are more marginalized. Our communities have moved toward an assimilationist, rather than a radical, view of sexual and gender identity. We have whitewashed and gentrified ‘LGBTQ.’” Such an individualizing and anti-structural approach reflects psychology’s epistemic riptide (Grzanka and Miles 2016).

Cole's (2009) *American Psychologist* paper on intersectionality was published in the thick of what we have traced here as the identities wave. The paper, which functioned both as a primer on intersectionality for unfamiliar readers and as a framework for conducting intersectionality research in psychology, became the most widely cited paper on intersectionality in psychology (Moradi et al. 2020).⁴ Reference of the paper joined Bowleg (2008) and Shields (2008) in a small pantheon of expected citations for intersectional work in psychology, which Grzanka (2020) observed to be a kind of bait-and-switch for foundational intersectionality texts and, in some cases, actual engagement with intersectionality theory, literatures, intellectual traditions, etc. While Cole's 2009 paper devotes significant space to explaining intersectionality in terms of Black feminist thought, ironically, citations of the paper sometimes reference Cole's work without any mention of racism or Black feminism.⁵ In the paper's wake, we see two currents emerge. One strand involves business-as-usual psychology with rhetorical intersectionality, the flavor of which Shin et al. (2017) found dominant in counseling psychology research that invokes intersectionality primarily as a demographic or variable-focused concern (i.e., we have men, we have women, we have Black people, we have white people, and some of these groups overlap). Discussion of so-called "multiple social identities," used to refer to the consideration by analysts of more than one identity at a time, is often equated then with intersectionality by way of Cole's paper. In fact, as experienced by individuals, social identities are always already multiple.

In the second strand, various versions of what Nash (2016) called feminist originalism coalesce into protracted resistance of intersectionality's cooptation in the discipline, particularly those projects that seek to move intersectionality to the center of the discipline (in social, developmental, and counseling contexts) by depoliticizing it and erasing Black women (Cole 2020). These kinds of papers in the second strand (e.g., Buchanan and Wiklund 2020; Grzanka 2020; McCormick et al. 2019) are not identical in methodological form or content—and not all are written by members of the invisible college we noted above—but they tend to share in common: insistence that intersectional work be situated in Black feminist and women of color intellectual and activist traditions; criticisms of psychologists' use of intersectionality theory in what are perceived to be apolitical and/or postpositivist projects; critiques of perceived misuses or misunderstandings of what intersectionality is (e.g., treating any two things that cross as an example of intersectionality); and arguments about the centrality of structural inequalities in intersectionality theory, as opposed to social identities.

Thus, it is imperative to understand the identities wave not only as encompassing the promotion of an identitarian paradigm in psychology but about the resistance of such a paradigm that persists today. Equally important, we suggest, is recognizing that the structural critique of identity-focused versions of intersectionality discourse in psychology does not derive solely from ideas outside of psychology but from within, as we explain below.

10.5 The first wave: Black feminist psychology and structural analysis (1983–2003)

The year 1983 marked the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Social Issues (JSI)* on racism and sexism in Black women's lives edited by Althea Smith and Abigail Stewart. As with many of the most cited and influential papers in intersectionality studies (see citation analyses above), it is unsurprising that these articles were collected in a special edition and published in the journal of the APA division on social issues, rather than as standalone manuscripts in more mainstream, "general" journals, such as *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* or *Psychological Review*. *JSI* is a historically important journal and one that has published research and theoretical papers very much at the vanguard of the discipline, including Martin Luther King, Jr.'s

incisive critique of the role of the behavioral scientist in combating anti-Black racism (King 1968). Smith and Stewart's special issue was published fully six years before Crenshaw (1989) first named intersectionality in the *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. One of the most remarkable elements of their introductory essay is the elaboration of a perspective on Black women's psychology that is easily mistaken for Crenshaw's theorization of intersectionality in both 1989 and 1991's classic "Mapping the Margins." For example, Smith and Stewart wrote:

It has become increasingly clear, though, that racism and sexism must be understood not merely as independent parallel processes, but as processes standing in a dynamic relation to each other. Thus, the forms of racism sometimes differ when directed at black men and black women. Moreover, even when attitudes, acts, or outcomes are the same, black men and black women may experience and respond to them differently. Similarly, the forms of sexism vary as a function of a woman's race, and so may her responses to it. The processes of racism and sexism, and the characteristics, race and sex, can be usefully compared for some purposes, but they must also be examined as they provide contexts for each other.

(1983, 1)

Their theorizing is characteristic of what we mark as the first wave of intersectionality in psychology. While preceding the formal academic articulation of the specific concept of intersectionality in the law (i.e., the erasure of Black women in antidiscrimination doctrine; Crenshaw 1989), this wave of scholarship is consistently defined by a number of features that would later be considered hallmarks of intersectional analysis (Cho et al. 2013; Collins 2019; Collins and Bilge 2020): an emphasis on both structure and context, the non-derivativeness of intersecting forms of systemic inequality, and the centering of Black women and women of color more broadly. Smith and Stewart's contribution underscores the longstanding observation that while Crenshaw (1989) is credited with introducing the term intersectionality (in academic writing), she did not introduce the idea (Collins 2019; Grzanka 2019). However, rarely have psychologists been identified as precursors to Crenshaw's framing (for another contemporaneous example written by a psychologist, see Hurtado 1989).

A critical point of Smith and Stewart's (1983) inaugurating volume is that single-axis approaches to racism and sexism may produce some valid accounts of Black women's experiences of stress and discrimination, but these one-dimensional analyses also flatten experiences of racism and sexism and efface the realities of being a woman of color in a white-supremacist, patriarchal society. Deeply consonant with Crenshaw's (1989) critique of the law's erasure of Black women, Smith and Stewart likewise assert that psychology has empirically disappeared Black women. Specifically, they argue that the accumulated evidence of racial and gender discrimination (i.e., measures of dependent variables) in psychology seems to have contributed to the reduction of sexism and racism into parallel, deeply similar processes. They propose an integrative contextual model that foregrounds "groups" over "effects" and encourages the observation of empirical phenomena in context rather than always in laboratories imagined to function as a facsimile of everywhere/nowhere (cf. Haraway 1988). Smith and Stewart's integrative contextual model is expressly inspired by Black feminist theory and made exigent by research that observed race and sex differences in the study of sexism and racism, respectively. The significant attention they pay to historical and political contexts of racism and sexism and their relation to structural inequality is notable, particularly given hegemonic psychology's investment in constructs thought to be transhistorical, acontextual, and universal—namely behaviors, attitudes, and emotions.

Smith and Stewart's (1983) special issue was not alone in advancing a structural critique of interlocking oppressions in psychological science, though it does reflect a pattern in the psychology literature of major intersectionality papers being published in special issues (e.g., *Sex Roles* 2008, 2013; *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 2017). When we reached out to our network of feminist psychologists (most of whom are members of the invisible college) for essential citations on intersectionality in psychology, they offered a litany of books and papers by feminist psychologists who built a foundation of theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence of intersectionality throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Though most of these names were familiar to us, it was striking how few are regularly invoked in intellectual histories of intersectionality (e.g., Hancock 2016) or interdisciplinary accounts of intersectionality studies (e.g., Cho et al. 2013). Hope Landrine, Beverly Greene, Michelle Fine, Pamela Trotman Reid, and Lillian Comas-Diaz were influential scholars who had produced path-breaking intersectional work prior to Crenshaw's. And several scholars ancillary to psychology were also noted as particularly catalyzing of intersectional thought within the discipline, such as Frances Beal and Philomena Essed.

Aída Hurtado is an especially consistent contributor to this early wave despite her work's underrepresentation in institutional itineraries of intersectionality (e.g., she is cited just once, for example, in both May's [2015] and Hancock's [2016] histories of intersectionality). The marginalization of her work during this early structural wave is illuminating particularly given the trajectories of intersectionality we traced above. One of the primary contributions of Hurtado's work is demonstrating the consequences of social identities in terms of social positioning relative to systems of power, i.e., subordination (Hurtado 1989). Across a wide range of scholarship, Hurtado used the experiences of women of color to theorize how practices of subordination vary in complex and sometimes unanticipated ways when taking into account multiple forms of simultaneous subordination. In other words, she clarified the social psychological significance of identities in terms of what Collins (2000) [in sociology] called the matrix of domination, rather than framing identities as merely individual differences or cultural influences. What is evident from Hurtado's body of work and scholarship through the first wave is that intersectional theorizing in psychology (1) was inaugurated at least a decade before Crenshaw (1989), (2) was characterized by a range of scholarship across the discipline (i.e., in counseling, social, etc.) rather than isolated in one subfield, and (3) centered women of color as both the source and subjects of intersectional thought *in psychology*.

10.6 Stewardship and other currents

The uptake narrative from which we began our investigation is a hegemonic narrative about intersectionality. However, just as Foucault (1978) destabilized the dominance of the repressive hypothesis in the Western history of sexuality, our feminist acoustic analysis suggests that if we listen carefully to the history of intersectionality in psychology, the uptake narrative is little more than that—a legible story that has taken hold but which has only partial empirical merit. Foucault's rejection of the repressive hypothesis did not mean that sexuality was never repressed; likewise, our troubling of the uptake narrative does not conclude that a substantive element of intersectional research in psychology is not characterized by the importing of intersectional ideas from beyond the formal boundaries of the discipline. Recent quantitative analyses of citation networks (Keuchenius and Mügge 2021; Moradi et al. 2020) have confirmed an explosion of intersectionality work post-2008, much of which credits Crenshaw's early texts with inspiring intersectionality scholarship in psychology. But mapping the margins of intersectional psychology tells another important, complicating story of overlapping and nonlinear intellectual

currents grappling with how best to account for the psychosocial consequences of interlocking systems of oppression.

Intersectionality did not *only* come from outside psychology and get taken up. Feminist psychologists were theorizing intersectionality before Crenshaw's key publications, but those works are little recognized, at least in terms of citation practices (Moradi et al. 2020).⁶ Certainly, it is now common for those narrating the history of intersectionality (e.g., May 2015) to identify precursors to Crenshaw who were developing intersectional frameworks that predate the term itself (e.g., the Combahee River Collective's 1977 statement, Anna Julia Cooper's writing in the late 19th century). But even in psychology-based explanations of intersectionality's history, it is less common to see early contributions of feminist psychologists credited with the development of intersectional concepts and ideas. Thus, much of the foundational scholarship that we locate in the first wave (i.e., Black feminist structural analysis) is effaced even as, ironically, this scholarship was largely about the erasure of Black women in science and society.

There are likely many forces that contribute to the sustenance of the uptake narrative and the missing contributions of the first wave. Smith and Stewart's 1983 special issue, as well as the bulk of the scholarship in the first wave, focused on Black women and other women of color—that is, *intracategorical* work in McCall's (2005) typology. As we noted, intracategorical work is perhaps the least epistemically compatible with mainstream psychology, which is more invested in the testing of differences between groups (i.e., *intercategorical* analysis). And given the dominance of mainstream psychology, it is unsurprising that scholars in the humanities and other social sciences might not look to the feminist psychology of the 1970s and 1980s for some origins of intersectional thought. But what if psychologists had begun their understanding of intersectionality from Smith and Stewart's (1983) "integrative contextual model" or Hurtado's (1989) framing of multiple subordination and positionality? Perhaps the genealogy of intersectionality in psychology would be fundamentally different, particularly if we think about these various waves as mechanical in the acoustic sense of the term: able to transport energy across time and space. Perhaps such a structural and intracategorical foundation would have made the shift to the prioritization of intercategorical analysis (i.e., the methods wave) and the avoidance of structure (i.e., including much of the identities wave) much more difficult. Might intersectional psychology have arrived someplace else—somewhere more transformative and more explicitly political?

But as we have also attempted to establish here, psychology's epistemic riptide is a powerful force (Grzanka and Miles 2016). Feminist psychologists have argued that much of psychological training and the processes by which we discipline ourselves is organized around anti-intersectional thought: universality, discreteness, parsimony, individuality (Case 2017). Riptides are distinguished by their capacity to overcome even the most strenuous resistance. Indeed, guidance on how to survive being caught in a riptide is simply to stay afloat and not swim against it. Though a somewhat sobering metaphor, psychology's epistemic riptide is extraordinarily powerful if we consider how even those of us who have pursued intersectional projects and advocated for intersectional approaches in psychology are disciplined epistemically and methodologically by the very forces we seek to resist. Moreover, the political consequences of this current means that psychological research is pulled back toward individuals and toward the most prototypical, privileged groups.

Imagining alternative currents is indeed a disciplinary project that implicates all aspects of psychological training and practice. Elsewhere, we have promoted "responsible stewardship" as one way of changing how psychologists conduct intersectional research by attending to foundational texts of intersectionality scholarship. We have routinely emphasized that psychologists should engage early intersectionality texts outside of psychology (Cole 2009; Moradi and

Grzanka 2017). Rather than taking a defensive or proprietary posture (*à la* feminist originalism; Nash 2016), responsible stewardship involves the promotion of fidelity to intersectional genealogies and politics. Our analysis here suggests responsible stewardship should also involve more reading and responding to authors in the first wave of intersectional psychology. Destabilizing the uptake narrative with these earlier texts might allow for new narratives to emerge and new currents to coalesce around generative intersectional concepts and approaches. As Foucault's (1978) rejection of the repressive hypothesis contributed to the re-envisioning of the history of sexuality and ushered disruptive paradigms for doing sexuality scholarship and activism (i.e., queer theory), the waves we have identified here are intended to open up rather than foreclose the history of intersectionality in psychology. Ultimately, there are no permanent waves (Hewitt 2010), and currents can and do shift, sometimes quickly and often unpredictably.

Notes

- 1 Over 7,000 citations as of June 2021, according to Google Scholar.
- 2 Else-Quest and Hyde (2016) are an exception, for example, in as much as their argument for the use of quantitative methods in intersectional psychology is prefaced by a discussion of epistemology. Nonetheless, they see intersectionality as potentially compatible with a range of epistemic assumptions, including those descended from traditional positivism (e.g., feminist empiricism).
- 3 May (2015) noted a similar, albeit even more transdisciplinary trend in intersectionality studies whereby increasing the number of intersections in a given analysis came to constitute superior forms of intersectional inquiry, as if examining the intersection of race and gender were not enough to sufficiently represent intersectionality.
- 4 According to Google Scholar, Cole (2009) has been cited 2,681 times, compared to 1,687 for Bowleg (2008) and 1,875 for Shields (2008).
- 5 Rather than invoke specific papers that engage in this practice, we encourage readers to conduct a search in PsycINFO for the words "Cole" and "intersectionality" to see the diverse ways in which the 2009 paper is used.
- 6 Stewart and Smith's (1983) introduction to the special issue on the psychology of Black women has been cited 293 times, according to Google Scholar as of August 2021, compared to the thousands of citations of the texts we highlighted in the methods and identities waves.

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11

NARRATIVES IN CONTEXT

Locating racism and sexism in Black women's health experiences

Kayonne Christy, Dominique Adams-Santos, and Celeste Watkins-Hayes

11.1 Introduction

A central feature of Black feminist scholarship is the foregrounding of the lived experiences of Black women. Frequently and historically ignored or miscast in scholarly, media, and quotidian understandings and accounts, the presentation of Black women's narratives in Black feminist scholarship is designed to not only provide more accurate accounts but also to affirm the humanity of a historically marginalized and systematically dehumanized group. Black feminist scholars translate Black women's narratives and corresponding worldviews to various audiences (Collins and Silva-Reis 2019). Because of the diversity of Black women's experiences, this translation work requires: "interpretations about Afro-American womanhood that describe and explain different expressions of common themes" (Collins 1986, 16). Through these interpretations, Black feminist scholars are better able to clarify the contours of Black women's standpoints.

Placing lived experiences in context helps move from the particular and specific to the patterned and perhaps even generalizable. Context can include historical genealogies and key events, demographic trends and shifts, economic phenomena, collective psychic experiences, political dynamics, and socio-cultural trends. Social science research methodologies are well-suited to unearthing and illuminating the broader context in which lived experiences are embedded. Qualitative tools, such as interviewing, participant observation, archival research, and comparative-historical analysis, as well as quantitative tools that measure larger trends through survey research, experimental design, and randomized-control trials, can place lived experiences in context.

As qualitative social scientists who embrace Black feminist epistemologies, we are tasked with interpreting and translating the face-value accounts of our participants to theorize and make larger claims about Black women's lives. How do we honor the authenticity of respondents' narratives while critically examining the purpose such narratives may have for the respondents themselves?¹ This question is especially complex as Black women may invest deeply in a worldview, interpretation of events, or self-presentation style for self-preservation in the face of forces that routinely seek to disrupt these resources in their lives.

Research on Black women's healthcare experiences has illuminated the complexity of this tension. Christy's (2021) research on Black maternal health included interviews with several women who described challenging healthcare interactions; however, they did not ascribe their

experiences to racism or sexism, despite their apparent positional disadvantage.² Zuri, a 32-year-old Black Canadian woman, recalled her frustration when her midwife assumed that she was a single Black mother. Nevertheless, she was hesitant to attribute the microaggression to racism: “I don’t know if . . . I don’t think she was racist. I’m not sure if it was a race comment.” Instead, Zuri speculated that it could be due to differences in upbringing: “I always like to give people the benefit of the doubt, so I said, ‘maybe that’s just how she grew up . . . maybe she’s just that way.’ I don’t know.” While it is indeed likely that an innocuous assumption shaped Zuri’s interactions with her provider, it is also arguable that race shaped those interactions. That Zuri insisted on an “upbringing” explanation rather than racism, sexism, or the intersection of both, suggests that even when medical racism is present, some Black women may not see it or be reluctant to name it. Indeed, startling Black maternal health outcomes suggest a disconnect between the larger trends and the interpretations of events experienced by Black women like Zuri.

How do we reconcile narratives offered by respondents and the broader context that may question, or even contradict, their assertions? One potential consequence of not engaging with this question is a failure to address disparities affecting Black women because their individual reports may downplay causal or contributing mechanisms. At the same time, social scientists, especially qualitative social scientists, must address fears that their interpretations could distort what study participants report.

One solution involves acknowledging how participant accounts are produced discursively in socio-cultural contexts permeated by hegemonic racialized, classed, and gendered discourses (Poon and Sin 2008; Maiter and Joseph 2017). For Zuri, minimizing the impact of racism may be how she navigates our racially hierarchical society—especially during pregnancy when additional stress can contribute to adverse birth outcomes (Lobel et al. 2008). Still, Zuri’s attribution of her experiences to an innocuous assumptions rather than racism echoes hegemonic “multicultural” discourses in Canada that ignore racism by obscuring how race is an important category of difference related to inequality (Bannerji 2000). Since hegemony operates when the dominant group “sets the limits—mental and structural—within which subordinate classes ‘live’ and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them” (Hall 2018, 91), what is our analytic responsibility—as qualitative sociologists who embrace Black feminism—when participants’ personal narratives uphold such discourses?

In this chapter, we probe into Watkins-Hayes’s (2019) interview-based study of women living with HIV to make sense of this analytic quandary. In particular, we ask the central question: why do some Black women rarely attribute their negative health outcomes to the poisonous concoction of anti-Black racism, sexism, and, in some cases, poverty? Indeed, interviews with Black women living with HIV illuminate this interpretational tension between self-perception—what Black women know and express—and sociological analysis.

11.2 Theoretical frames

We draw on two related intersectional conceptions of oppression to begin unpacking this analytic tension: what Dotson (2017) refers to as a “systems-based conception of oppression” versus an “experience-based conception of oppression.” A “systems-based conception” of oppression—commonly alluded to in discussions about intersectionality—examines how discrete systems of oppression, including racism, sexism, and classism, create unique, interlocking forms of subjugation/jeopardization (Crenshaw 1989; Dotson 2017). Connectedly, an “experience-based conception” of oppression is attentive to one’s holistic experience of simultaneous oppressions (Dotson 2017). It is concerned with how the synthesis of interlocking oppressions uniquely manifests in the lives of Black women and how Black women understand these experiences

(Combahee River Collective 1977). The importance of this conception of oppression should not be overlooked: while a systems-based conception of oppression is helpful in explaining how Black women are impacted by the intersection of racism and sexism, an experience-based conception of oppression sheds light on how Black women perceive and make sense of this jeopardization in their everyday lives. These perceptions of oppression will be diverse because oppression, like all other social phenomena, is multistable: it will hold stable for a variety of empirical accounts. As put by Dotson (2017, 124), who explicates the importance of multistability in the context of oppression:

Oppression admits to a number of interpretations and a number of manifestations and a number of conceptions. How a multistable phenomenon is interpreted in space will depend on a variety of factors, not the least of which will be one's "perspectival perception," one's goals (Ihde 2009, p.12), including, but not limited to, cultural inheritances, cognitive commitments, and embodied location.

Black women's unique perspectival perceptions will result in varied accounts of oppression: some accounts of oppression may be similar and consistent while others may be contradictory. The notion of multistability sheds light on why some Black women offer detailed descriptions of how systems of oppression, such as racism and sexism, impact their experiences of health, while others are hesitant to attribute systems of inequality as a determinant of their outcomes. However, because oppression is multistable, all of these empirical accounts can hold true without undermining the existence of oppression.

When interviewing Black women about their experiences of health, we are drawing on their unique experience-based conceptions of oppression. We engage in translation work by interpreting their lived experiences of oppression through a broader systems-based conception of oppression to understand and address how structural inequality impacts Black women's lives.

The analogy of a poisonous gas reveals the importance of this analytic work. In this analogy, system-based oppression (i.e., racism, sexism) is an odorless, colorless, but poisonous gas that Black women inhale every day. The resulting symptoms are what Watkins-Hayes (2019) refers to as *injuries of inequality*: "big and small wounds to well-being that represent the mental, physical, and social toll of acute inequity" (14). Therefore, the way that Black women describe their gas-induced symptoms represents their experience-based conceptions of oppression.

In this analogy, some Black women are conscious of the gas and its poisonous properties. These women may try to reduce the impact of the gas (e.g., strategically adopting various protective health measures) or try to stop the gas from being produced (e.g., through activism and advocacy). When asked about their health, these Black women will attribute their gas-induced symptoms to the inhalation of the toxin. They will often describe how they secured their own gas masks, so to speak, and how they are working to ensure the same for others until the gas can be eliminated. In social science terms, these Black women see the link between their injuries of inequality and structural oppression.

Other Black women, however, may navigate life unaware and/or uncertain that the gas exists. When asked about their health, they may deny the existence of the gas and/or suspect a gas leak, but not know its origin. Others may acknowledge that a poisonous gas exists but may believe that they are unaffected by it. These women may chalk up their gas-induced symptoms to something more visible in their immediate environment rather than the gas itself. In social science terms, these Black women may be able to identify various injuries of inequality in their lives; however, they do not attribute those injuries to structural factors.

The central point of this analogy is that regardless of whether Black women are aware of the gas, it still exists. And because the gas is poisonous, it is killing them. Not only this, but one of the central ways the gas garners its power is through its capacity to elude detection—even and especially by those it harms and kills. Black women’s stories about their health (e.g., their experience-based conceptions of oppression) reveal how they make sense of their health outcomes (e.g., their injuries of inequality). However, because not all women may recognize the impact of the gas (e.g., a systems-based conception of oppression), it is our analytic responsibility to describe this link so as to productively address their outcomes.

In the following section, we draw on Watkins-Hayes’s (2019) interview-based study on women living with HIV to discuss how this is done in practice—namely, how to: (1) use life narratives; (2) situate life narratives within an institutional context; and (3) put those institutions within a broader structural context. In so doing, we can identify how negative health outcomes among Black women might best be understood as *injuries of inequality*. Those injuries are often the result of structural forces such as anti-Black racism, sexism, and classism that produce a compromised ability to protect oneself from harm. Inequality and their subsequent injuries may also render Black women *institutionally illegible*. That is to say, their intersectional life circumstances between multiple vectors of inequality, or at juxtapositions of disadvantage and privilege (such as middle-class or affluent Black women who also struggle in the healthcare system) can collide with prevalent practices, norms, and interactions in healthcare settings. We now turn to the story of Keisha Rainey, a young Black woman from Chicago living with HIV, to illuminate these themes.³

11.3 Keisha’s story

11.3.1 *In her own words*

The story flickered across Keisha Rainey’s Facebook newsfeed and catapulted her into a stunned rage. The ethical debates surrounding the man’s arrest were irrelevant to Keisha; to her, this story was much more personal. There it was: a photo of a man she had once found attractive. The face staring back at her was that of both a stranger and the catalyst that changed her life. In 2003, just two months shy of her 17th birthday, Keisha had sex for the first time with the man now on her computer screen. Keisha and Jimmy met while accompanying friends on a double date. In her interview, Keisha explained that Jimmy asked if he could “break [her] virginity,” and she obliged. He was a 22-year-old charmer living near her grandmother, in a neighborhood where HIV rates were among the highest in the city. Keisha believes she acquired HIV during this sexual encounter. Now Jimmy was being criminally prosecuted for exposing someone else to the virus without their knowledge, 18 years prior to advocacy groups and legislators successfully fighting to get the state’s HIV criminalization laws repealed.⁴

Keisha got sick within weeks of having sex with Jimmy. Her mother noticed and was convinced her youngest daughter was pregnant. She demanded Keisha take a home pregnancy test, having her repeat it twice after the negative result. Puzzled by Keisha’s physical symptoms, her mother took her to the local clinic and demanded the doctor order a battery of tests. Sitting across from Watkins-Hayes at a local AIDS nonprofit in April 2005, Keisha’s voice still crackled with emotion:

We go to the clinic, and they give me another pregnancy test. Then they test me for STDs. Found out I had chlamydia. Then all of a sudden, my mom was like, “Well, you know what, give her an AIDS test.” And I’m sitting there looking at my mom like, “A what? What do I need an AIDS test for?” Weeks later, I go back in there and they tell

me, “Well, come on in the room and sit down.” I’m looking at this guy, and I went in by myself ’cause my mom was really angry at me. So I figured, “Okay, I better do all this stuff by myself.” I don’t know. So they call me in this room, and this big guy comes in, and he sits in front of me. And I’m sitting there looking like, “What’s going on?” The guy tells me, “Do you know what AIDS is?”

Keisha was stunned by the news. Searching for answers and some accountability, her mother had contacted Jimmy a few weeks prior to her diagnosis when she believed her daughter was pregnant. He denied being the father. When Keisha’s mother tried to reach out to him again after the diagnosis, Jimmy was nowhere to be found. The public health department was unable to locate him. Because Jimmy disappeared from the neighborhood where he had been a constant presence, Keisha came to believe he had deliberately transmitted the virus to her: “I felt heartbroken, ‘cause I figured he meant to do it. He knew. That’s how I felt. He knew what he had, and he planted this on me, and now he’s gonna run away from it.”

It is worth noting that Keisha does not point to the influence of racism and/or sexism in telling her story. During multiple interviews over a ten-year period, Keisha’s story largely focused on her interpersonal dynamics with Jimmy, reflecting her feelings of betrayal and devastation. Without further context, we might be tempted to concentrate our analysis on their relationship and Jimmy’s apparent lack of disclosure of his HIV status. Instead, we suggest putting her “narrative in context” to capture (1) how negative health outcomes can be viewed as *injuries of inequality* rather than happenstance or completely self-produced experiences and (2) how Black women become illegible to institutions that do not recognize, and are not responsive to, their particular needs.

11.3.2 Narrative in context

11.3.2.1 Injuries of inequality

Keisha’s narrative gives us an incomplete picture of HIV transmission mechanisms and the social context of risk. A contextual analysis and systems-based approach provides a fuller picture. In fact, a complex web of challenges—structural, political, cultural, *and* interpersonal—set the stage for Keisha’s experience and led to the epidemic’s startling and devastating consequences in Black communities (Cohen 1999; Mackenzie 2013). Keisha and Jimmy lived in a neighborhood with some of the highest HIV rates in Chicago. This meant that both were navigating their early sexual experiences in a high-stakes context. Black women diagnosed as HIV positive often have no identified or reported risk factors and are more likely than white women to have acquired HIV through heterosexual sex rather than through illicit drug use (Hader et al. 2001). From a policy standpoint, the weak public health response to the needs of Black and Brown communities undermined the capacity to build a strong HIV prevention and treatment infrastructure from the early years of the epidemic, and debates continue over whether communities of color are receiving a level of support commensurate with the size of the epidemic in these populations (Arnold et al. 2009). More than 90 percent of new HIV infections in the United States are transmitted by persons who do not know they have the virus or are not receiving treatment, underscoring the importance of early diagnosis and linkage to medical care in reducing new HIV infections (US CDC 2015). Among racial groups, Black people are the least likely to receive medical treatment after diagnosis, resulting in a greater risk of transmission within the population. They also have less access to testing and other preventative tools relative to whites (Arnold et al. 2009). Simultaneously, limited sex education, and demands for abstinence-only school curricula in some communities, have left many with inadequate information about sexual health.

In addition to noting the structural drivers of HIV/AIDS, unequal gender dynamics continue to play important roles in the epidemic among women: Keisha and Jimmy's five-year age gap, her legal status as a minor when they had sex, and the violence evoked by the "breaking" of Keisha's virginity, highlight how those power modalities can operate when younger girls partner with older men. This is highly reminiscent of Sanyu Mojola's 2014 analysis in *Love, Money, and HIV: Becoming a Modern African Woman in the Age of AIDS*, which reminds us of the importance of the transition to adulthood as a pivotal and highly vulnerable moment for HIV transmission among women. Keisha's story is echoed in Mojola's discussion of how young Kenyan women, as "consuming women" who desire access to the material goods promoted in a global economy, partner with older men who can provide those goods at the cost of heightening their risk of contracting HIV. Lastly, it must be noted that the sex ratio in many Black communities contributes to dense social-sexual networks within an economically and racially segregated context, as "the shortage of men places women at a disadvantage in negotiating and maintaining mutually monogamous relationships" (Adimora and Schoenbach 2005, S118).

Nonetheless, an intersectional analysis that focuses only on Black women's oppression can fail to recognize Jimmy's potential vulnerabilities as well. As Black men navigate and are called upon to reinforce masculinity norms in these environments, they, too, struggle under risky conditions. They create relationships within and across networks that are sometimes transactional, sometimes emotional, and often both as they seek love, comfort, safety, resources, pleasure, and power in the quest for survival and mobility. We can only speculate about what and when Jimmy knew about his HIV status and why he chose silence as a coping strategy. But as AIDS scholars Lisa Bowleg and Anita Raj (2012) observe, the reality is that Black men and women "live, work, socialize, worship, and form romantic and sexual relationships in the same communities, and as epidemiological data document, share sexual risk within their communities" (173). Keisha and Jimmy were doing what many people their age do: trying to make a romantic connection. However, they were doing so in a higher-risk environment because of how the epidemic had infiltrated their world and generated a complex landscape with several hazards. Silence, blame, and avoidance of difficult subjects can easily become the tools by which individuals navigate the terrain and further fuel an epidemic.

This complex sexual playing field, with its political, economic, and social landmines, left Keisha and Jimmy with limited tools to take control of their sexual health and manage unseen vulnerabilities. Ten years after AIDS activist Rae Lewis-Thornton's landmark appearance on the 1994 cover of *Essence Magazine* next to the headline "I'm young, I'm educated, I'm drug-free, and I'm dying of AIDS," Keisha contracted the virus, demonstrating in sharp relief Black women's long history of struggle against the epidemic.

11.3.2.2 Institutional illegibility

Analyzing narratives in context means we not only document Black women's injuries but also situate their narratives in the institutions in which women are embedded. Institutions are locations where the abstract ideas of inequality become specific and localized. They are the policies, practices, people, interactions, spaces, and places that shape people's experiences with the social world. Individuals cannot always see these mechanisms. For example, a clinic whose hours of operation are only the standard business hours of 9:00 am–5:00 pm on Monday–Friday can be read as engaging in a benign practice. However, as Black women often work in jobs without flexibility, in which they might be financially penalized for leaving work, this practice arguably represents forms of racial, class, and gender bias that can produce negative health outcomes. As such, women may only minimally engage their health care providers or pursue care under emer-

gency circumstances. In this sense, Black women, and their lived experiences, are potentially rendered institutionally illegible within seemingly standard policies and practices.

Keisha's story highlights the importance of accounting for this institutional illegibility when placing Black women's narratives in context. Keisha faced a considerable struggle after her HIV diagnosis: she became estranged from her parents, moved in with a new boyfriend, and became pregnant at 19 years old. When that relationship deteriorated due to her boyfriend's growing emotional abuse, Keisha found herself without housing. She bounced from shelter to shelter: three months in one designated for young adults, another three in a shelter for people living with HIV, and finally two months in a shelter for pregnant girls. Several stigmatizing situations weighed on her—a fresh breakup from an abusive relationship, her HIV status, homelessness, and a teenage pregnancy. In each new environment, Keisha negotiated those events and conditions. What would she disclose? To whom and under what circumstances? And would these institutional environments have the tools to help her navigate multiple marginalized statuses, or what Michele Tracy Berger (2010) calls “intersectional stigma”?

She found her first stop, Safe Space Shelter, to be unwelcoming because of her HIV status:

I was pretty low-key with my status. No one knew until one of my roommates saw one of my medications, Combivir, which is Magic Johnson's medicine. And she started going around the shelter saying, “Well, that's the medicine that Magic Johnson takes ...”

Her relationships with the other residents deteriorated from there. They made comments about her having HIV and incorrectly speculated that they could become “infected” from sharing a bathroom or food with her. “In order for me to just keep my calm, I moved out,” Keisha explained. “And that's when I went to Stepping Stone.”

At the Stepping Stone residential facility, Keisha found a community of people living with HIV, but they did not have much else in common with her. The residents were older, and many had histories of addiction. The facility also lacked staff with experience working with pregnant women living with HIV, and she was placed on the fifth floor without an elevator in the building. From there, Keisha moved to Ashley's Place, a six-unit building for young pregnant women. Sharing a two-bedroom apartment with another resident gave her much-needed privacy and supported her needs as a pregnant woman. But without any other residents living with HIV that she knew of, she felt isolated again. As many of the girls living in Ashley's Place were former residents of the Safe Space Shelter, her HIV status circulated quickly. But this time, it did not become a topic of tension: “They saw how I reacted when it first came out at Safe Space. They knew just to leave it alone.”

For Keisha, coming to terms with her HIV status was a struggle, in part because of her experiences with institutions in which she felt stigmatized and isolated. Her age and lack of drug history prevented her from fully fitting into the part of the HIV safety net populated mostly by women who were in their twenties during the crack epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. Keisha discussed this at length when Watkins-Hayes asked if she found HIV support groups helpful:

Not really, because it wasn't my age group. I couldn't say to the older women, “Girl, you right!” you know? I can't do it. ... If I can be in a room full of teenagers, and they're all talking about being HIV positive, now that's what I would like. 'Cause maybe then I can say, “That was the same way I got it.” I can't sit here and talk to a 40-year-old, 'cause I can't relate to that. So that's why I don't go. And most of them are

all substance abuse—drugs and all that. I don't like that. I really don't like being around people who've been on drugs.

Keisha's relationship with institutions was therefore consistently difficult, as no institution seemed completely conducive to her multiple intersectional statuses. She did have some positive interactions: a case manager who provided a housing voucher and helped her find an apartment when she really needed it, the advice of her doctor who successfully guided Keisha to help her prevent her baby from acquiring HIV, and casual conversations with other women living with HIV in clinic waiting rooms. In those moments, Keisha gathered important information that often moved her in the right direction. However, in part because of her institutional illegibility, she struggled to maintain long-term relationships with institutions, despite the wealth of social support services in her community ostensibly poised to assist her. This kind of institutional illegibility runs the risk of robbing Black women of life-saving resources and therefore should be accounted for when placing their narratives in context.

11.4 Conclusion

In revisiting the story of a young Black woman living with HIV, we made sense of the analytical dilemma that when Black women talk about their experiences of health, they rarely point to racism and sexism as important factors in their health outcomes. Keisha Rainey's story highlighted one such case in which injuries are rarely linked to systemic oppression by social science research participants. If we return to the poisonous gas analogy, Keisha's personal narrative attributed her symptoms to something other than the gas itself. She perceived her first sexual partner, Jimmy, as solely responsible for her positive HIV status, and attributed her various moves from shelter to shelter to the negative interpersonal interactions she had with fellow residents. While these micro-level circumstances are valid, various meso- and macro-level factors also shaped her experiences with HIV. That Keisha's first sexual encounter took place in a community with a high rate of HIV put her at greater risk of contracting the virus. Furthermore, Keisha's intersecting social identities as a Black teenage mother living with HIV made her illegible to the institutions tasked with supporting her in perhaps some, but not all, of her identities. Because these institutions did not recognize (and thus, were not responsive to) Keisha's unique needs, it was difficult for her to find long-term housing and a social support system to work through the emotional toll of her positive status. By placing Keisha's narrative in a broader institutional and structural context, or by making the poisonous gas visible, we are better able to understand how the health outcomes and experiences of Black women such as Keisha can be viewed as *injuries of inequality* rather than happenstance or completely self-produced.

As we seek to understand the diverse lived experiences of Black women—and advocate for life-saving policies and practices—placing their narratives in context reveals the structural and institutional dynamics that serve as the backdrop of their lives. It is our analytic responsibility to honor the voices of Black women while remaining cognizant of how their personal accounts may be only one part of the story.

Notes

- 1 Interviewer positionality, interview environment, and interview stakes from the interviewee's perspective also influence what participants say during an interview. For a full discussion on this, see Watkins-Hayes (2019).
- 2 For a full discussion of Christy's research on Black women's prenatal healthcare experiences, see Christy (2021).

- 3 Excerpts of this discussion originally appeared in Watkins-Hayes (2019). The authors thank the University of California Press for permission to reprint.
- 4 For research critiquing HIV criminalization laws, see Burris and Cameron (2008); Hoppe (2017); Thrasher (2015). For more on the repeal of the laws in Illinois, see Center for HIV Law and Policy (2021).

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12

SYSTEM-BUILDING, POLITICAL ORDERS, AND INDIGENOUS FEMINIST DIPLOMACIES

Mark Rifkin

One of the principal insights of theorizations of intersectionality has been the interdependent co-constitution of what might otherwise be understood as distinct vectors of identity, such as gender, race, sexuality, class, ability, and religion. More than operating in tandem, such “vectors” play fundamental roles in defining the terms, contours, and orientations of each other. This inherent imbrication is how scholars can speak of Black genders or the ways people of color are understood as immanently perverse in their particular non-whitenesses.¹ This kind of analysis, though, can lead to an effort to specify background structural dynamics that explain formations of minoritization, marginalization, and domination. If advocacy in the name of a particular oppressed group figured along one “vector” (often referred to as “single-issue” politics) can deny both the multidimensional construction of that identity category and the ways it itself is crisscrossed by dynamics of power and privilege, then anti-oppression work seems to depend not on recognizing groups’ specificity or understanding them as semi-autonomous units but on seeking at a larger scale to name and dismantle systems through which structural violence is (re)produced. However, in this framing, what happens to notions of peoplehood, polity, and, in Audra Simpson’s terms, non-dominant “political orders”?² How can intersectional forms of analytical system-building end up normalizing modes of domination by offering no means of conceptualizing projects of collective self-determination? In this chapter, I will consider two relatively recent examples of such system-building, scholarship by Anna Carastathis and Ange-Marie Hancock, and, then, I will turn to work by two Indigenous feminist theorists, Melanie Yazzie (Diné) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg), that illustrates how intersectionality might be employed in ways that enable engagement with such struggles for self-determination, replacing the analytical role of larger scale structural modeling with what might be understood as theorizations of intersectional diplomacy.

The concept of intersectionality can name the specificity of what might be understood as particular social locations, but as Carastathis and Hancock suggest, focusing on that visibility project underemphasizes the work intersectionality does as an interpretive or analytical frame in raising questions about the character, contours, and presumed stability of distinctions among groups or kinds of identity. They refuse the idea of intersectionality as a kind of layering that produces an account of a point/area on a social map (set at whatever scale). As Carastathis argues,

many interpretations of intersectionality fail to engage with it substantively as a critique of dominant strategies of representation. This is significant because they interpret it, instead, as a positive representation of dually (or triply, or multiply) oppressed groups, such as women of color.³

Thus, intersectionality challenges the implicitly paradigmatic status of what Carastathis calls “transparent members” of a marginalized group, those who are oppressed in one sense and whose voices/experiences can serve as the model for what “race” or “gender” mean when treated in isolation. More than simply revealing the “positive” presence of others who are oppressed in multiple ways, though, the concept provides a means of raising questions about the integrity of all identity categories, the ways they function as “coalitions: internally heterogeneous, complex unities constituted by their internal differences and dissonances.”⁴ In this way, intersectionality operates as a means of contesting the wholeness and self-identity of group identities, such that they cannot be in any sense added to each other to arrive at the putative particularity of a distinct identity—the apparent coherence of working-class queer Indigenous woman, for example, as a kind of social position. Hancock presents this undoing of de facto additivity as “fundamentally challeng[ing] the notion of a single margin-center metaphor” in favor of “ontological complexity.”⁵ Forms of social description and normative claims to recognition that depend on aggregations of identity categories in order to specify a (sub)group, Hancock suggests, “retain an idea of the severability of race from gender and from other categories of difference.” In order to locate the positive particularity of that social position or that (genericized) standpoint, one must treat the identity categories as de facto additives in order to arrive at a category of person seen as having a semi-determinate content, which Hancock argues entails “the conflation of experience with identity.” Even if the resulting mix or intersection is seen as irreducible to its *components*, the resulting compound category is cast as having a specificity effaced by the use of any of the singular categories of which it is made, rather than understanding that compound category as, itself, not a unity—as transected by differences and as shaped by “situational contingency.”⁶ Moreover, the idea of rendering visible the presumptively shared experiences of multiple-marginalization by those who belong to a given compound category—seeking to *represent* them as something like a coherent constituency, in Carastathis’s terms—can create the sense of a series of points that can be plotted relative to each other in greater or lesser proximity to a de facto center of power.

Both Hancock and Carastathis reject that understanding of social structure, which they present as fairly static and inattentive to the infinite regress of difference within any named (compound) category/group/constituency, in favor of attending to processes of structuration through which identities, belonging, and group bounding are negotiated within continually shifting circumstances and relations of power. In their analyses, intersectionality enables the unsettling of what can be presumed to be a priori unities of identity, perspective, experience, interest, and relative privilege. Hancock often frames such dynamics as being “neither purely an oppressor [n] or purely oppressed,” such that “the opportunity structures for agency are [understood as] shifting and changing due to the idea that privilege itself is contingent.” Put another way, intersectionality less locates categorical specificity than upsets the idea that categorical specificity (at any scale) is meaningful absent an engagement with the particular scene, event, or setting in question (again, at whatever scale) and how forms of identity are in dynamic flux and negotiation within it. The “mutually constitutive relationship between categories” renders the functioning of any of them dependent on how they codefine each other within a given context.⁷ In a similar vein, Carastathis emphasizes “[t]he intersectional *critique* of identity politics—which reveals identity categories to be coalitions: internally heterogeneous, complex unities constituted by their internal differences and dissonances and by internal as well as external relations of power”:

Models of coalitions that presuppose the fixity of coalescing groups—and the homogeneity of collective identities—elide intragroup differences, a danger to which intersectionality as a critique of categories alerts us. But such models also naturalize politicized identities, constructing the boundaries between groups as pre-given and obscuring their genealogies.⁸

By foregrounding “differences and dissonances” within what are taken to be coherent “identity categories,” intersectionality can reveal processes of coalition-making that are themselves open-ended, in terms of both the content and contours of group identity and the relation of (members of) that group to what otherwise would be understood as outside persons, issues, and political projects.

This intellectual effort seeks to suspend a sense of bounded closure in ways that seem to have little to do with system-building, as I earlier suggested. However, the very deconstructive potentials borne by intersectionality—in refusing the idea of a set content (of oppression/experience) for compound categories or the ability to use such multiplied categorizations to situate persons and groups relative to each other in a pre-given analytical structure (separate from enmeshed social negotiations in which identities take shape in co-constituting ways)—leave open the question of how intersectionality contributes to political struggle other than as a negation of various kinds of homogenizing closure and static structural modeling. If Hancock and Carastathis challenge the idea of providing positive content for (compound) identities, they reintroduce such positivity with respect to intersectionality’s role in making possible multidimensional projects of political analysis, organizing, and advocacy. To think along singular identitarian lines is to lose track of how what might appear to be separate kinds of movements (or movements ordered around distinct constituencies, aims, and interests) are, in fact, necessarily entangled in ways for which feminist theorizing and mobilization need to account. Intersectionality provides a needed framework for understanding the layered ways that power operates and for conceptualizing directions and processes of social transformation that do not reinscribe or normalize forms of domination by treating them as a static background against which to plot a given (compound) group’s access to greater agency, resources, and decision-making authority. More than revealing the limits of or problems within particular form(ul)ations of collectivity and projects for justice/liberation, in these accounts, intersectionality serves as an integrative structure that enables the development of a more holistic sense of how what may appear to be distinct modes of oppression actually work in and through each other.

In this way, intersectionality provides the means for generating more systemic models of interlocking processes of domination and the dynamic ways they engage and shape subjectivity, individual and collective. Carastathis suggests, “If identities are always, already multiple rather than singular, identity politics needs to pursue multiple political goals, goals around which multiple overlapping groups might coalesce,” adding, “The integration of intersectional identities that are disparaged, denied visibility, and marginalized within identity-based politics is crucially interconnected with the collective ability to integrate struggles against simultaneous oppression(s).” Such *coalescence* and *integration* move toward “a (more) unified theory of oppression,” one that can conceptualize the “social totality ... in a nonfragmented way.”⁹ In emphasizing analytical wholeness, cast as the opposite of a *fragmented* perspective that can only engage single-issue oppressions in semi-isolation, Carastathis presents intersectionality as providing methodological and theoretical tools for generating a more unifying account of how multidimensional modes of domination function interdependently. Doing so indicates a system-building intellectual horizon in which intersectionality provides the means of mapping how identities and oppressions take shape—for modeling how power works, albeit without a clear articulation of scale (or one

for which the nation-state serves as the *de facto* frame). As noted earlier, Hancock characterizes the shift from a visibility project to one that fully engages the “mutually constitutive relationship between categories” as an embrace of “ontological complexity.” She argues, “Intersectionality possesses a distinct account of reality (a.k.a. ‘ontology’) and thus requires its own epistemological tenets to adjudicate among knowledge claims.” More than simply indicating problematic ways of conceptualizing group identities and particular forms of domination, intersectionality is an ontological framework, with its own epistemological and explanatory principles, that provides a more adequate or politically efficacious way of understanding social reality. In this sense, it is both a system of knowledge and a means of mapping social dynamics in their layeredness, which Hancock at one point describes as “holographic” in its ability to address such complexity at all scales (although also not offering a specific theory of how to address questions of scale).¹⁰ This effort to model multiplicity as an irreducible part of social analysis refuses the reification and atomization of groups, identity categories, and modes of oppression, and these accounts implicitly seek to scale such analysis up to provide a vision of social structures/dynamics and how they operate.

However, in intellectually transposing the deconstructive work of challenging categorical separations into a broader vision of “social totality” or an ontological account of the real, these understandings of intersectionality-as-system leave little room for conceptualizing the principles, processes, and normative claims of collectivity—including modes of peoplehood (Indigenous and otherwise). How do we understand the ways collectivities form, what sustains those identifications and regularities, and the roles they play as semi-autonomous political actors asserting various kinds of self-determination? If intersectionality contests, in Carastathis’s terms quoted earlier, the “naturaliz[ation of] politicize[d] identities, constructing the boundaries between groups as pre-given and obscuring their genealogies,”¹¹ it does not offer much in the way of theoretical resources for inherently valuing political collectivities as political orders, as entities enacting modes of self-governance. Moreover, in extrapolating outward from the critique of isolating categories of identity, intersectionality-as-system can undermine political projects of collective self-determination by implicitly casting them as insular, essentializing, and fragmenting while also seeking to situate them within some greater “whole” or “totality” that supposedly provides the *de facto* terms for understanding/guiding their internal processes.

In contrast, many Indigenous feminist analyses draw on intersectional principles while insisting on the integrity (although not closedness or isolation) of peoplehood. Rather than necessarily integrating Indigenous political orders into a larger scale or encompassing wholeness, articulations of intersectionality in the work of Melanie Yazzie and Leanne Simpson illustrate a non-systemic approach to intersectionality that preserves the coherence of Native self-determination while also marking the complexity of how racial and colonial oppression are co-constituted with the production/regulation of gender, sexuality, and capitalist relations.¹² Yazzie begins her essay “Decolonizing Development in Diné Bikeyah” by stating her intent “to make a significant contribution ... to the traditions of Diné resistance that seeks to carry Diné life into the future.”¹³ In starting from the premise of an investment in the existence of Diné peoplehood (more commonly known among non-Diné as the Navajo Nation), Yazzie presents that collective being as methodologically and theoretically irreducible. I don’t mean that it has no component parts or that it is not cross-cut by various identities and social formations, to which Yazzie attends in ways I’ll address. What I mean is that, unlike in Carastathis and Hancock’s framings, the focus on Diné life, starting from the coherence and centrality of this collective identity, is neither a fragmented perspective nor a denial of social complexity. Rather, Yazzie takes Diné presence as a distinct political order as a necessary grounding for political theorizing and organizing for justice, especially given that “tribal nations [in the US] have not

achieved national liberation from colonial and imperial control by their occupying force and are still therefore colonized.”¹⁴ Adopting an analytical framework in which Diné self-articulations (and those of other Indigenous peoples) need to be situated within a supervening totality recapitulates at the level of intellectual form the dynamics of settler occupation, where Indigenous assertions of self-determination appear as insufficiently integral—as gaining meaning only in terms of their incorporation into a larger whole.

One of the principal ways such colonial jurisdictional and infrastructural interpellation occurs, Yazzie argues, is through discourses of “development.” Diné territory serves as the site for resource extraction for energy industries while heavily scripted Navajo political participation in that process is cast as the primary means of enacting sovereignty and self-determination. Yazzie observes that “development becomes the unquestioned fulcrum for understanding a whole range of Diné materialities and histories,” “integrat[ing] capitalism into the political mechanics of national and economic independence” such that “inequality and exploitation still dominate collective Navajo political horizons.” Rather than suggesting that Navajo governance therefore needs to be understood as a node within a larger unified theory of oppression(s) under capitalism, or adopting an ontological approach that sees such governance as expressive of a reifying account of identity that problematically severs indigeneity from its constituting context, Yazzie, instead, draws on what might be understood as an intersectional analysis in indicating the presence of alternative ways of figuring Diné peoplehood that refuse settler, capitalist interpellations. She indicates, “Our decolonial aspirations are not just about sovereignty and exerting independence over energy development; they are about challenging the very capitalist notion of development that works in tandem with the structure of settler colonialism to reproduce and secure Diné death.” In contesting this conception of Navajo governance, Yazzie looks to the work of women land defenders “who draw connections between the everyday lived material realities of environmental violence and larger structures of colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy” that “masquerad[e] as liberal promises of development, life, and growth.” While characterizing those dynamics as “larger,” Yazzie illustrates how attending to the ways they transect institutionalized Navajo political projects reveals the presence of Diné people, principles, and self-understandings not encompassed within such official formulations of sovereignty. Foregrounding those “structures” and their implications in the lives of Diné people highlights how particular versions of Navajo identity, especially those institutionalized by the US-recognized Navajo national government, normalize notions of personhood, placemaking, and social value that contribute to the debilitation of Diné people, lands, and other beings. Considering how the colonial regulation of Navajo governance, the capitalist commodification of territory and natural resources, and the heteropatriarchal devaluation of women (as well as affective connections and interdependencies of care) codefine each other in official Navajo policy opens up toward other extant formulations of Diné collectivity and of Indigenous political orders more broadly. The women land defenders highlight “Diné conceptions of life rooted in one’s relationship with the land and responsibilities to life-giving forces and beings like sheep, corn, family, and holy beings,” “an ontology that exists always in relation to or in kinship with an entire web of relations that have specific connections to specific places.”¹⁵ While we might see intersectionality as a vital tool in Yazzie’s analysis, drawing attention to the kinds of power and privilege at play in particular constructions of Navajo identity, it does not so much provide an ontology as offer a methodological/theoretical means of tracking the multivalent dynamics of settlement and the ways they subordinate and seek to foreclose Diné ontologies.

This framing of Diné peoplehood extends to thinking about relations among oppressed people(s) as part of what might be described as an intersectional diplomacy in which collectivity and political orders remain conceptually irreducible. If intersectionality aims to undo the

sense of “the fixity of coalescing groups” and to highlight the “mutually constitutive relationship between categories,”¹⁶ Yazzie’s articulation of what she terms “Indigenous internationalist feminism” provides ways of addressing the relationships among political collectivities that neither reifies their individual identities nor understands them as operating in isolation.¹⁷ In “US Imperialism and the Problem of ‘Culture’ in Indigenous Politics,” she argues that neoliberal political economies produce such a sense of fixity by casting Indigenous and other oppressed peoples as culture-bearing units whose unique traditions/customs can be made the basis for commodifying forms of entrepreneurship, and such fetishizing culturalization “has defanged our dreams of collective liberation” by denying the potential for modes of “international solidarity” not mediated through a capitalist, settler set of institutional frameworks.¹⁸ The emphasis on “culture” and “tradition” as markers of the specificity of given Indigenous peoples produces an insulating sense of unity detached both from matters of governance and the ways the enactment of governance itself depends on open-ended networks of relation with other peoples and polities.¹⁹

Refusing the portrayal of peoplehood as expressive of a homogenizing cultural singularity—of Indigenous political orders as fixed in their character and content—less undoes the coherence of peoples as collective entities than re-figures the terms through which to understand that coherence. It is not so much an isomorphic unit as a regularity that emerges through processes of relation internally and with other peoples/political orders. Yazzie presents “radical international solidarity” as “premised on practices of making kin—of making relatives and claiming relatives—that lie at the heart of Indigenous definitions of nationhood and belonging.” Indigenous political orders appear here less as a priori unities than as (re)made through continually renewed networks of relation that operate at multiple scales, as woven through processes of “making relatives” that constitute and sustain Indigenous nationhood and belonging to it while also providing means of connecting to other oppressed peoples. Yazzie further suggests that Indigenous articulations of self-determination and projects of decolonization take shape and gain “legibility through routes and relationships with other national liberation and decolonization struggles,” which make them less “like a noun or bounded entity” than “a system and practice of reciprocal relationships.”²⁰ To say that peoplehood is irreducible, then, is not to cast it as internally homogeneous or to see it as a kind of monad that exists in ways disconnected from a range of social struggles (within and without). Instead, we might see Yazzie’s analyses as modeling the ways intersectionality opens possibilities for (re)thinking the contours of political collectivity and its relation to various modes of domination and opposition to them without reducing the sense of collectivity to a series of *coalitions*, subsuming it into a broader “social totality,” or subsuming it into an ontological framework organized around the inherent limits of categories of collectivity—rather than, say, their capacity for internal complex multiplicity and external negotiated relations as part of their being as political orders.

The intersectional exploration of such capacities can involve tracing how notions of collectivity have come to be shaped by dominant institutions and the ways investigating the status of marked, minoritized groups within those institutionalized accounts can open onto a richer, more layered, and less oppressive sense of peoplehood. In *As We Have Always Done*, Leanne Simpson addresses how Native sovereignties have come to be structured in heteropatriarchal ways and the implications of these patterns for (re)thinking Indigenous political orders.²¹ She suggests that movements for Indigenous resurgence and self-determination “must critically interrogate the hierarchies of heteropatriarchy in all its forms in order to stop replicating it in our nation and movement building,” noting that “issues regarding children, families, sexual and gender violence, and bodies” often are cast as of secondary import within “Indigenous politics”—as “issues that can wait until we have the land back.” More than simply subordinating such issues, Indigenous political institutions, Simpson argues, have endorsed modes of liberal

privatization through which such issues come to be understood as personal/domestic rather than as pertaining in significant ways to the forms, principles, and goals of Indigenous governance. She observes, “A great deal of the colonizer’s energy has gone into breaking the intimate connection of Nishnaabeg bodies (and minds and spirits) to each other and to the practices and associated knowledges that connect us to land, because this is the base of our power.” To the extent that state-recognized Native governments and modes of governance normalize and reenact such dynamics, they reaffirm settler ideologies through which Indigenous peoplehood is remade in ways conducive to the state’s exertion of jurisdiction over Native people(s) and lands, including the substitution of the nuclear family form for philosophies and ethics of kinship.²² Attending to forms of difference within Indigenous nations—the ways the bodies of and issues associated with women, gender non-conforming people, and queer folks are sidelined in articulations of the “political”—brings to the fore the introjection of settler social forms within Indigenous governance and the attendant displacement, foreclosure, disavowal, and suppression of alternative modes of governance, less amenable to interpellation within the categories of the settler state and its legal and administrative mappings.

We might understand this analysis as an intersectional critique, although it does not raise questions about the status or coherence of Nishnaabeg peoplehood, instead giving rise to an alternative account of it. Focusing on the ways institutionalized Indigenous political identities have taken form around notions of identity that cast various Native persons as privatized, deviant, and pathological and that displace discussion of gender and sexuality from matters of governance leads Simpson to a rescaled understanding of Indigenous peoplehood organized around the notion that “every body is a political order” and that such peoplehood emerges from “living in our bodies as political orders.” Rather than presenting each Indigenous person as an isolated unit, this (re)formulation adopts an intersectional framework in refusing a conception of Indigenous nationhood that is separable from the differences among those belonging to a given people and the ways those differences are central, not peripheral, to the everyday experience and dynamics of peoplehood. Indigenous bodies cannot be isolated and disowned for the ways they do not conform to institutionalized accounts of political identity. Rescaling peoplehood to center the ways Indigenous political orders emerge immanently out of relations among persons both undoes the sense of a homogeneous identity for the collective (including one that reifies “culture” and “tradition” in the ways Yazzie addresses) and emphasizes the complex, multidimensional relations among Indigenous persons as that of which Indigenous political orders are made. As Simpson suggests, “Our nation is a hub of Nishnaabeg networks,” and those networks are continually (re)constructed through ordinary, embodied interactions of association, desire, intimacy, and care, providing the social infrastructure and normative framework for the being and becoming of Indigenous collectivity: “Reciprocal recognition is a core Nishnaabeg practice ... Reciprocal recognition within our lives as Nishnaabeg people is ubiquitous, embedded, and inherent.”²³ Intersectional analysis can be seen as informing this account of Nishnaabeg peoplehood, and as directly contributing to a transformative reconceptualization of Indigenous political orders (when compared with the understandings of Native nationhood acknowledged by the settler state), while analytically retaining a primary engagement with such political orders as vital for Indigenous persons and peoples and as necessary in marking and contesting the structural violence enacted by settler colonialism.

As in Yazzie’s analysis, the intersectionally resonant principles Simpson offers extend beyond Indigenous polities to thinking about how such polities relate to other groups, struggles, and political orders and what an understanding of such diplomacies might contribute to intersectional analysis. Simpson argues that Nishnaabeg relations with other peoples operate as an extension of the ethics of reciprocity and mutual recognition that obtain within Nishnaabeg

nationhood, including with non-human entities: “It is a web of connections to each other, the plant nations, the animal nations, the rivers and lakes, the cosmos, and our neighboring Indigenous nations,” adding, “our existence has always been inherently international regardless of how rooted in place we are. We have always been networked.”²⁴ Simpson approaches Indigenous political orders as inherently enmeshed in relationships with other political orders, groups, and beings, and those relationships do not compromise the integrity of a given people’s identity, even as that identity remains ever-mediated by and in-process in connection to those relationships. This sense of imbrication includes attending to non-Indigenous social struggles and the ways Indigenous people(s) participate within them. If, as Hancock suggests, intersectionality troubles the idea of being “purely an oppressor or purely oppressed,”²⁵ Simpson explores how Native people(s) might contribute to and contest forms of anti-Blackness. Some scholars have equated Indigenous sovereignty with Euro-American ideologies of possession and, therefore, understood the former as part of an inherently anti-Black property regime.²⁶ However, from within a commitment to Indigenous peoplehood and land-based sovereignty, Simpson asks, “How am I accountable to the struggle of Black peoples” in Nishnaabeg territories? She seeks to “ensure that my nationhood and relationship to land on the north shore of Lake Ontario” does not “replicate systems that restrict Black spatialities or replicate geographies of domination.”²⁷ Considering how Native articulations of nationhood may contribute to the denial of Black geographies of belonging does not foreclose Indigenous political orders or suggest that they need to be viewed as categorically suspicious (or perhaps suspicious as a category of political collectivity).²⁸ Instead, Simpson highlights the importance of considering how formulations of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination may participate within networks of domination in ways that complement her engagement with how institutionalized modes of Indigenous governance bear forms of settler heteropatriarchy. Doing that kind of intersectional work, though, entails extending the idea of separateness and collectivity at play in her theorization of Indigenous political orders to other people(s). Simpson notes, “Within Nishnaabeg political thought, we have practices of sharing space with other nations and communities of peoples and respecting that autonomy go govern themselves over these lands,” and with regard to Nishnaabeg relations with Black communities, she observes, “we would have to figure out political mechanisms to respect each other’s governance, sovereignty, and jurisdiction while committing to taking care of our shared ecosystem.”²⁹ The recognition of political orders here is not a form of Indigenous exceptionalism; an investigation of how Indigenous formations of identity and placemaking may contribute to extant modes of (anti-Black) oppression becomes the occasion for an intersectional extension of the notion of political orders and peoplehood to those not recognized as such by the state—an act of diplomacy.

In the place of the analytical absorption of these groups and the relations within and among them into a supervening conceptual system, Simpson’s approach, as Yazzie’s does, understands collectivity as irreducible while also foregrounding the complex and shifting relations between “inside” and “outside” and the need for reconceptualizing collective identity through attention to such differences/connections/implications. This methodological and theoretical emphasis on Indigenous peoplehood, though, remains at odds with an understanding of intersectionality (explicitly or implicitly) as a positive, system-building project. Illustrating the ways that categories of identity and group identification are porous, overlapping, and enmeshed within complex social contexts—such that they cannot be treated as isomorphic unities or reified singularities—can move rather readily into understanding intersectionality as an analytical framework that can provide an orienting background in engaging modes of oppression, minoritized identity, and social struggle.³⁰ However, this move toward positioning intersectionality as itself a “unified theory of oppression” or an ontology can work to undermine modes of political collectivity

by (often indirectly) presenting them as partial, interested, flawed, fragmented, and conceptually blinkered and, then, situating intersectional analysis as the proper intellectual position from which to offer a full, textured, layered, multidimensional account of the ways power and privilege operate in social reality—an account of how social struggles should be conceived of in relation to each other and how to map the multivalent dynamics of domination. The resulting *coalescence, integration, wholeness, or totality*, though, has few resources for addressing how and why collectivity matters, including how and why particular kinds of collectivity might matter for those who are part of them and for the struggles for justice that they are undertaking. By contrast, Yazzie and Simpson both draw on what we can understand as modes of intersectional analysis (the critical and deconstructive relation to categorical homogeneity and single-issue formulations that Carastathis and Hancock elaborate) while also centering Indigenous political orders and their projects of self-determination as necessary components of social justice movements and mappings. Their accounts reveal the ways that intersectional methods can transform understandings of Indigenous political identity (contesting state-endorsed/enforced heteropatriarchal and capitalist paradigms) and relations among peoples (as reciprocal and kinship-based rather than as entrepreneurial entities or monadic unities). In doing so, they further suggest models of ongoing diplomatic connection that can extend what we might mean by a political order (moving away from a political scale structure that is de facto dependent on and pegged to nation-states) while also offering intersectional tools for negotiating tensions and relations in situated ways that refuse exceptionalism, engage others' struggles, and are responsive to multivalent formulations of justice.

Notes

- 1 See Cathey Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ* 3.4 (1997): 437–465; Qwo-Li Driskill, *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2016); Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Mark Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011); Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
- 2 Audra Simpson, "The State is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty," *Theory & Event* 19.4 (2016) (online).
- 3 Anna Carastathis, *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 108.
- 4 Carastathis, *Intersectionality*, 65, 7.
- 5 Ange-Marie Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 58, 71.
- 6 Hancock, *Intersectionality*, 100, 113.
- 7 Hancock, *Intersectionality*, 82, 115, 59.
- 8 Carastathis, *Intersectionality*, 7, 184–185.
- 9 Carastathis, *Intersectionality*, 190, 194, 124, 188.
- 10 Hancock, *Intersectionality*, 59, 71, 106, 120.
- 11 Carastathis, *Intersectionality*, 184–185.
- 12 Carastathis, though, does raise questions about the extent to which feminist articulations of intersectionality can encompass Indigenous movements and politics, particularly with regard to the use of notions of the "decolonial" in ways largely divorced from Indigenous articulations of sovereignty and self-determination (*Intersectionality*, 229).
- 13 Melanie K. Yazzie, "Decolonizing Development in Diné Bikeyah: Resource Extraction, Anti-Capitalism, and Relational Futures," *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 9 (2018): 25.
- 14 Yazzie, "Decolonizing Development," 29.
- 15 Yazzie, "Decolonizing Development," 27, 28, 31, 33, 34.

- 16 Carastathis, *Intersectionality*, 184; Hancock, *Intersectionality*, 59.
- 17 Melanie K. Yazzie, "US Imperialism and the Problem of 'Culture' in Indigenous Politics: Towards Indigenous Internationalist Feminism," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 43.3 (2019), 98.
- 18 Yazzie, "US Imperialism," 99.
- 19 For critiques of the culturalization of Indigenous peoplehood, see also Joanne Barker, *Native Acts: Law, Recognition, and Cultural Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Jean Dennison, *Colonial Entanglement: Constituting a Twenty-First Century Osage Nation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Karen Engle, *The Elusive Promise of Indigenous Development: Rights, Culture, Strategy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
- 20 Yazzie, "US Imperialism," 111, 107, 108. Yazzie also emphasizes the presence of treaties and reciprocal systems of relation with entities "beyond the human" ("US Imperialism," 109). See also Yazzie, "Decolonizing Development," 34.
- 21 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). Simpson is addressing Indigenous peoples on the lands claimed by Canada who have been subjected to the specific settler regime of that country, including the patriarchal definition of "Indian" enshrined in the Indian Act for over a century (from 1876 to 1985), but her analysis can extend to Indigenous polities on lands claimed by the US as well. On the heteropatriarchal dynamics of US and Canadian Indian policy, see also Barker, *Native Acts*; Joanne Barker (ed.), *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Martin J. Cannon, *Men, Masculinity, and the Indian Act* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2019); Jennifer Nez Denetdale, "Chairmen, Presidents, and Princesses: The Navajo Nation, Gender, and the Politics of Tradition" *Wicazo Sa Review* 21.1 (2006): 9–28; Mishuana Goeman, *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013); Rifkin, *When Did Indians*.
- 22 Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 51, 53, 41, 110.
- 23 Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 112, 192, 8, 182.
- 24 Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 8, 56.
- 25 Hancock, *Intersectionality*, 82.
- 26 For examples, see Jared Sexton, "The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," *Critical Sociology* (December 2014): 1–15; Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
- 27 Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 230.
- 28 On Black geographies of belonging, see Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
- 29 Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 230, 231.
- 30 On the idea of an orienting background, see Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

13

INTERSECTIONALITY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

Sexual violence and racial subordination in the courts

Sameena Mulla

13.1 Bad citational habits

Like all theories, intersectionality is an imperfect tool that contains both great potential and reasonable limitations.¹ Its ubiquitous presence in our textual and discursive lives can frustrate both scholarly and non-academic readers who find the term sprinkled liberally² throughout our multimodal landscape, while also finding its meaning to be elusive and slippery. In anthropological work that seeks to understand oppression and domination, the term itself is often invoked in an empty fashion: “intersectional analysis” is deployed as self-evident, and taken for granted.³ Though many scholars have contributed to the formulation and critique of intersectionality, I return here to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work, as she is most closely associated with the origin of the term itself, though she is careful to attribute her formulation to the forebears with whom she thought (Combahee River Collective 1977; Davis 1981). As an anthropologist, I have found one of the most productive ways to read the work of Crenshaw is as an ethnographic text that speaks directly to the institutional, geographic, and historical context in which I conduct my fieldwork in the US. Specifically, Crenshaw’s work gives an account of a set of legal mechanisms that demonstrate the operations of the state in reproducing racial hierarchy and oppression. Grappling with Crenshaw by rooting intersectionality in the legal regimes in which she developed her understanding draws attention to the limitations of institutional paths to justice and equity. These limitations are rooted in the racial logics of US law. Her critique also demonstrates how whiteness is centered in both labor law and regimes of response to violence against women. Taking this into account primes ethnographers to take note of the subtle and unsubtle ways in which whiteness operates in the milieus in which we conduct fieldwork.

13.2 Separation and drift

It is difficult to maintain the separation between the original texts through which intersectionality was posited as a theory, and the drift that has occurred in its many applications and citations. To me, the most troubling iteration of intersectionality is when it is exorcised of its relationship to racial subordination.⁴ Of course, ideas have lives and conceptually shift as they are released in

the world, jubilantly deployed by one after the other well-intentioned scholar (and on occasion, some ill-intentioned ones). But in scholarly circles, where we may sometimes pride ourselves on care for ideas, there is citation, and then there is application. Has the idea been summoned into the text without being engaged?⁵ I sometimes categorize this as mere aesthetic invocation which serves as a point of entry, in which bibliographic presence propels the text into a particular citational matrix.⁶ This differs from citations of intersectionality that are asked to do conceptual work within the text. Such citation, from my perspective, is meaningful when intersectionality, whether one is citing Crenshaw or another Black feminist theorist engaging, critiquing, or illuminating intersectionality, is evoked so as to channel its transformative potential in one's work.⁷ Transformative potential need not be total or all-encompassing. Seismic activity can, in fact, be subtle, careful, and hyper-local and specific in how it creates new topographies. In anthropology, this may mean that theory shifts the unfolding of a description, reveals a structure heretofore unseen, or lends the text a polyvocality that was previously inaudible.

13.3 The uses of intersectionality

These uses of intersectionality can be productive whether they are close readings of the texts through which intersectionality has become a meaningful approach or whether they are based on looser interpretations.⁸ They can also be meaningful in the sense that our inheritance of the scholarship of others can be likened, to borrow the words of my teacher, Veena Das, to overhearing snippets of a conversation from another room. Both modes of engaging, reading closely with the writer's intent in mind and reading creatively, making do with what one can glean from what has been "overheard," were encouraged by Das. This is to say, there are things that writers either did or didn't say about their ideas, and there are things that they do not explicitly address where it is good for us to think through with the instruments that they have crafted for us. In the sections that follow, I outline the specificities with which I find it useful to think ethnographically with Crenshaw, particularly when it concerns race, violence and law, and the speculative landscapes of race and subjugation through which my fieldwork propels me to pose questions of intersectionality as an analytic.

13.4 Courts and clinics

My own ethnographic projects have focused on sexual assault interventions in both clinical and legal contexts. I have studied sexual assault interventions in Baltimore emergency rooms and sexual assault adjudication in Milwaukee courtrooms, two modes of responding to sexual violence that are heavily, though never adequately, resourced by the US state, and which are bitterly entangled with questions of race and subordination (Mulla 2014; Hlavka and Mulla 2021). The institutional nodes of medicine and law coalesce around the interlocutors with whom I work, forming the "subject" of intervention, who is consistently more often than not a Black woman in these two urban settings. It bears noting, as well, that the personnel who carry out the work of intervening, be they nurses, doctors, attorneys, judges, or social workers, are overwhelmingly white. In both the clinic and the courts, race is rarely discussed in an explicit manner by the nurses, doctors, attorneys, judges, or social workers, while the patient or witness operates from the perspective that her Blackness is deeply consequential to the way she must navigate these institutions.⁹ My perspectives on how to address questions of racial subordination in sexual assault intervention are rooted in the specific contexts in which Crenshaw initially offered us an exposition of intersectionality. She draws attention to the intractability of the law as a site for Black women seeking justice. Anthropologists may formulate this in a complementary fashion,

as a process in which the state, using law, generates a problem of illegibility; that is, the law does not recognize the legal subjectivity of Black women because its own practices of inscription produce a “securing and undoing of identities” (Das and Poole 2004, 15). Crenshaw’s legal examples of Black women’s marginalization, or the undoing of Black women’s identities as credible legal complainants, focused on antidiscrimination cases and labor law and on the experiences of women of color seeking relief as victims of violence (Crenshaw 1989, 1993).

13.5 Thinking with labor

In “Demarginalizing the Intersection,” Crenshaw details the way in which Black women are excluded from antidiscrimination doctrines that are meant to provide labor protections for workers (1989, 140). She provides several examples of the court’s inability to recognize labor discrimination as grounded in both racism and sexism and shows how Black women are subjected to a “single-axis” doctrine that further marginalizes them as seekers of legal relief.¹⁰ In short, the legal doctrine she critiques does not recognize claimants who allege discrimination on the basis of being Black women, because it does not see the problems of Black women as extending to all women in that workplace, nor to all Black people in that workplace. Crenshaw then extends this analysis of labor law to a broader argument about how policies are often premised on the universalized perspective of white people, and fail to address the experiences of Black women. She points to the experiences of Black and white women in relation to the workforce (1989, 155), critiquing the feminist formulation of “separate spheres,” in which Black women do not have the same luxury of laboring in the home as white women do. She states, also, that the “singular focus on rape as a manifestation of male power over female sexuality tends to eclipse the use of rape as a weapon of racial terror” (1989, 158).

13.6 Centering livelihoods

These moves suggest many ways of conducting ethnographic fieldwork that incorporate Crenshaw’s thinking about intersectionality. In the Baltimore emergency room which was my first field site, this meant centering narratives of the patients who asserted their concerns as laborers when they came to the emergency room to see a forensic nurse. Those worries almost always manifested in the form of an anxious request for a note to excuse one for missed work (Mulla 2016). Nurses were sometimes dismissive of these concerns or even commented that the patient seemed distracted by their anxiety around missed work, hinting that “real victims” should be more focused on the crisis of sexual assault. The nurses missed how Black women’s investments in their livelihood and their need to sustain themselves and their kin were often at the center of their vulnerability and their suffering. Sexual assault was more than a psychic and emotional crisis; its chronic sequelae included the long-term impacts that would make women more precarious in the months ahead.

13.7 Unsafety

In my fieldnotes, I often wrote about the way some Black women sought to hitchhike to work as the city’s woefully inadequate public transportation forced them to travel in this way. Their need to traverse the city to get to work and make a living often exposed travelers to the risk of sexual violence (Mulla 2016). On another scale, attending to the ways in which Black women were vulnerable to violence also highlighted the racial terror imposed on Black women as part of an economic underclass in a city that failed to sustain their livelihoods or provide affordable

and safe housing or adequate public transportation. While others are similarly imperiled, the manifestation of this racial terror as sexual assault was unique to Black women. In this sense, Crenshaw's analytic allows me to think of how discourses around "public safety" are formed around bourgeois white identities precisely because I centered the conditions under which the patients I saw in the hospital labored and allowed myself to hear their narratives articulating the way they experienced disruption of their livelihoods. The sexual assault intervention, insofar as it was designed in service to a particular discourse of public safety, did not adequately meet the needs of Black women, particularly Black working women, and did little to nothing to secure the livelihoods of all of the workers who experienced sexual assault intervention.

13.8 Turning to medicine

Medicine's relationship to racial subordination both overlaps and diverges from that of criminal justice.¹¹ For example, the sexual assault forensic examination is interdisciplinary in its method and has drawn on many tools from gynecological medicine. Thinking of forensic examination as embedded in gynecology and gynecology's history reframes the present through a project of racial subordination that figures the ideal subject of a pelvic examination. As scholars have documented, J. Marion Sims, who has been credited by some as the "Father of Obstetric Medicine," developed several tools and techniques of gynecological and obstetric medicine by practicing and experimenting on the enslaved women we know as Anarcha, Betsy, and Lucy, and several others whose names are unknown to us (Cooper Owens 2017; Kapsalis 1997). The conditions under which pelvic examination was developed, including the use of the speculum and the repair of fistulas, invite consideration of how consent was not sought by those women who participated in Sims's "research." To be clear, the techniques of pelvic examination originated in a context lacking consent, where the subjects of examination were not able to opt in or out in any meaningful way. These techniques were further developed under the framework of "repair," that is, returning enslaved women to their full capacity to labor for slave owners. These labors were both as producers and as household workers, as well as reproductive laborers whose reproductive capacity could be exploited and alienated. Sims himself also exploited and extracted the labor and assistance of Anarcha, Betsy, Lucy, and their fellow enslaved women as nurses, caregivers, and research assistants whose contributions to his knowledge-making endeavors extended beyond the physical conscription of their bodies (Cooper Owens 2017). Medicine's extractive relationship with Black women patients is exemplified in tales such as these. The use of the same techniques of pelvic examination in a sexual assault forensic examination requires me to think about questions of consent both as medicine's bureaucratized consent and as statutory questions of consent that are at the heart of sexual assault prosecution. The ghost of these histories seemed to assert itself in the submission and acquiescence that forensic nurses often expected from people undergoing pelvic examinations.

13.9 The uses of rape

While "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Class" introduced readers to the potential implications of intersectionality for the politics of labor, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" built on this introduction by calling for readers to consider intersectionality in assessing how systems of redress served women of color who experienced "battering and rape" (1993). Recognizing that social movements had advocated for seeing battering and rape as "part of a broad-scale system of domination that affects women as a class" (1993, 1241), Crenshaw evaluated the ways in which questions of race,

power, and subordination might be identified within the institutional venues through which gender-based violence was conventionally addressed. What I take to be Crenshaw's key intervention here is that "reforms of rape law and judicial procedures that are premised on narrow conceptions of gender subordination may not address the devaluation of Black women" (1993, 1270). In my research in both clinical and legal sites, I noted that many of the institutions that are empowered to address sexual violence, in particular those in the criminal justice system, discriminate against people of color, and although Black and brown women may navigate criminal justice responses as "victims" from the perspective of law enforcement and the courts, their status as Black and brown women is not suspended in the criminal justice system. Crenshaw also notes that

the use of rape to legitimize efforts to control and discipline the Black community is well established, and the casting of all Black men as potential threats to the sanctity of white womanhood was a familiar construct that antiracists confronted and attempted to dispel over a century ago.

(1993, 1241)

The work I conducted in collaboration with Heather Hlavka in Milwaukee's courts is replete with instances in which both Black men and women, be they in the role of defendant or witness for the state, were subjected to raced, classed, and gendered narratives of Black social deficits and pathologies (Hlavka and Mulla 2021). For example, while prosecutors would frequently draw on stereotypes of Black masculine criminality to work against the defendant on trial for sexual assault, defense attorneys would adopt another gendered variation of the same discourse and cast Black women victims of rape as sex workers engaged in transactional sex (Hlavka and Mulla 2021, 53). Racial subordination also manifests directly in the form of sentencing lengths, and there are multiple studies that have demonstrated consistent bias against Black defendants (Steffensmeier, Ulmer, and Kramer 1998; Wisconsin Court System 2020). When a judge told one particular white defendant that he had "carefully qualified" his sentencing decision because, in comparison to other sexual assault cases, it was not, "the most sickening sexual assaults one can imagine" one is left wondering how race plays a role in the juridical imagination of crime (Hlavka and Mulla 2021, 238). Most of the cases that this judge had ruled on involved Black men as defendants, many of whom this same judge had labeled "monsters" and "bad actors," while sometimes speaking on the record of the many "problems" in "the African American community" (Hlavka and Mulla 2021, 213–14). Whatever the outcome of each case, the legal process reinscribed the racial subordination of Black and brown men and women without regard to whether they appeared as witnesses, defendants, or even victims of crime.

13.10 Resisting normativity

My ethnographic exploration of sexual violence and our responses to this violence in the US is animated by the desire to identify the precise mechanisms through which racial subordination, its specificities, and its quotidian routines operate. When Crenshaw examines the cases of *DeGraffenreid*, *Moore*, and *Travenol* and marks their ascendance into legal doctrine, she is demonstrating how the law itself calcifies so as to exclude Black women as legal claimants (1989, 150). While legal scholars most often rely on case law to trace the ways in which the law shifts or entrenches particular norms, ethnographers in the courts work in the space of precedent-conforming, routine cases that are rarely enshrined in case law. Crenshaw concludes her 1989 article,

I have stated earlier that the failure to embrace the complexities of compoundedness is not simply a matter of political will, but is also due to the influence of a way of thinking about discrimination which structures politics so that struggles are categorized as singular issues. Moreover, *this structure imports a descriptive and normative view of society that reinforces the status quo.*

It is somewhat ironic that those concerned with alleviating the ills of racism and sexism should adopt such a top-down approach to discrimination. If their efforts instead began with addressing the restructuring and remaking the world where necessary, then others who are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit. In addition, it seems that placing those who currently are marginalized in the center is the most effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalize experiences and undermine potential collective action.

(Crenshaw 1989, 167, emphasis mine)

As an ethnographer, thinking about ways to produce a descriptive language and practice that does not import a normative view that reinforces the status quo invites reflection on my methodology.¹² Can ethnography place Black women at its center and “resist efforts to compartmentalize experience”? Like efforts to invoke the idea of intersectionality, my own efforts as an anthropologist will sometimes be successful and unsuccessful.¹³ What I have learned to appreciate about Crenshaw’s approach to intersectionality and its relevance to my own work is its specific reference to the law and her concerns about antidiscrimination law and issues related to labor. This turn presses me to think about the ways in which Black women bring their concerns as workers and breadwinners to sexual assault intervention. Crenshaw also turns her attention to the recognition of the limits of the law with respect to relief from violence for women of color. By reading Crenshaw’s work in a narrower context with regards to law and sexual violence, and understanding its potential to draw my attention to the particular experiences of Black women navigating the institutional sites that I study, I hope to have offered a sense in which Crenshaw’s ideas can inform anthropological inquiry and can be attuned to the ways in which sexual assault intervention, as a form of statecraft and self-making, serves the broader purpose of reproducing racial subordination within a deeply gendered schema.

Notes

- 1 How could I start here? Isn’t it risky to point to the limitations of an idea that is so critical to feminist discourse? Or is it unreasonable to hold Black feminist theorists to standards of perfection that we rarely invite when encountering the many limitations of white men’s theory? Should not a theory only be applied under the most felicitous conditions? To answer my own questions: yes, it’s racist to hold Black women theorists to higher standards than other theorists, and no idea is so boundless that it can be applied to everything. That is literally a recipe for destruction. Or to put it like so: if all you have is a hammer, then everything looks like a nail. What I am suggesting is that we all need multiple theoretical tools, and intersectionality can’t be asked to do all of the work.
- 2 Pun intended.
- 3 Yes, I have done this myself. Yes, I currently (2022) edit a journal of feminist scholarship within my field, and I see this a lot. I like to think I didn’t know any better when I used to do this, and I extend this same benefit of the doubt to others. I do feel ashamed of having cited in this way, and have found that the best way to shed this shame is to correct my own proclivity and form a new citational habit. I consciously choose, in this essay and in other writings, not to cite instances of superficial citation. My intention is to disrupt the reproduction of authority we lend texts that wield ideas without regard to their specificity or transformative potential. I will similarly not cite such instances in disciplines beyond anthropology, as it is clear that anthropology is not the only offender in this instance.

- 4 You know you have seen it. See also Hil Malatino on the deracination of analysis of violence against trans women, and the dangers that lie in such politics (2020).
- 5 I have called this tokenistic citation. And yes, that is not pretty.
- 6 Citational name-dropping, perhaps?
- 7 From my perspective as a journal editor and book series editor, I would definitely count intersectionality as the most-cited Black feminist concept within anthropological circles, though the superficial citation of Black women scholars is not limited to Kimberlé Crenshaw. Christen Smith and Dominique Garrett-Scott have reviewed the extent to which Black women scholars are excluded within anthropological journals (2021). They also raise the point that it is not merely that a scholar is cited, but that it is how that scholar is cited that matters. The 1619 Project is another candidate for the same levels of citation as intersectionality, and in this example, we can see that right-wing politics are in fact deeply invested in citing Nikole Hannah Jones without a (deep/any?) reading of the articles that make up the project, nor an understanding or specific reference to any of the ideas or contributing authors within the collection. Indeed, the attribution of the entirety of the content to Hannah Jones is in part a signal of this willful refusal to engage the text as text, and instead to object to Hannah Jones as a symbol of a historical narrative that centers Black people.
- 8 Are you remembering the various versions of conversations that you have had that include some iteration of “But Crenshaw never said THAT”? Substitute Patricia Hill Collins or the Combahee River Collective or Irma McLaurin or Jennifer Nash or Angela Davis or other Black feminist thinkers we rely on for illuminations of the idea of intersectionality, both those who addressed it before and those who addressed it after the concept that is intersectionality coalesced around Crenshaw’s term.
- 9 Whenever I relate this fact, I hear a sing-song mirroring of the title of Akasha Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith’s collection: “All the nurses, judges and lawyers are white, all the victims, witnesses and defendants are Black, but some of us are brave.” They didn’t mean this literally, which is how the scene unfolds in the court, but I take Hull and Smith’s point that women’s studies excluded Black women from its disciplinary configurations, and that it is vital to establish a Black women’s studies (1982, xvii), and recognize the implications of studying sexual violence and sexual assault intervention from within Black women’s studies. I think this provocation is enriched in conversation with Crenshaw’s own concerns about the marginalization of Black women by the law.
- 10 When I was in the field, I frequently wondered whether Black women were seen as victims and patients in need of care during their hospital sojourns. Care was, of course, dispensed. But it was often parsimonious, the bare minimum. Once a rape crisis advocate turned to me when we were out on a call in Baltimore and said that one of these days, I would get to see a “real” victim, especially if I took a call from the suburban hospital. It was painful to hear this from a Black woman rape crisis advocate, who I understand is no more or less immune to the infectious nature of anti-Blackness. Her suggestion that “real” victims appear in the suburban hospital demonstrated her investment in the myth of white innocence. Over time, I decided that I should invest more energy into thinking about how she and I and all of us are taught such doctrines, are taught not to see Black women as deserving of care and tenderness.
- 11 If you don’t mind, a short genealogical aside. Crenshaw does not talk about medicine in either of the two articles that I am working with in this essay, but this is one of the ways in which we can creatively extend her thinking into this realm that absolutely collides with the legal sphere in the realm of sexual assault intervention.
- 12 Elsewhere, I have written with Amber Powell and Heather Hlavka on intersectionality as a reflexive method in multiracial collaborative ethnography (Powell, Mulla, and Hlavka 2022).
- 13 I try, I really do. That is all we can do. I made an effort to both be specific about Crenshaw and what she does and does not say, but also to pull out from her legal analysis an understanding of what an ethnographic sensibility informed by her writing might include. Her writing is but one of many strands that has informed my ethnographic sensibility, and I hope that the details I have included make the ways in which Crenshaw has shaped my work easily apprehensible. Legible, even.

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14

JOURNEYS OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Contingency and collision

Rita Kaur Dhamoon

14.1 Introduction

In various settings, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw describes intersectionality as a *provisional* not fixed idea, a *heuristic* device rather than a categorical one, a nodal point rather than a fixed system, an *analytical sensibility* not a standardized methodology (Crenshaw, Cho, and McCall 2013), and a *prism* rather than a grand theory (cited in Coaston 2019). There is, in other words, a fundamental historical, political, and analytical *contingency* conceptualized of intersectionality. As Carathaias notes about Crenshaw's work, "intersectionality represents a transitional concept"; as a provisional concept, it can tentatively bridge "the heuristic divide between present and future, between dominant ideologies and social justice transformative claims, anticipating or pointing towards the transcendence of a way of thinking that maintains a hold over our imaginations" (Carathaias 2014, 61).

Yet, as intersectionality has traveled across academic disciplines, policy circles, and community/activist settings, a number of habits have tended to enclose and control the possibilities of intersectionality; the result is that intersectionality has become more sedimented than contingent. Such sedimented habits include: claiming work as intersectional to inoculate against criticism of a singular focus on (cis white) women as a universalizing category; claims to some kind of non-essentializing politics while simultaneously defaulting to static and bounded representations of identities or subjects and defaulting to cognitive essentialisms about identity (Harris 1999); epistemological slippages between, for example, intersectionality and Black feminism and/or Black women (Nash 2019); flickering between fetishizing and disregarding Black women and their insights; focusing on a specific intersection as a silo without looking at the broader context of interactions; and falling into polarized positions of being either for or against intersectionality, whereby intersectionality is both hailed and deemed to have failed, and Black women and Black feminisms are either hypervalued or devalued (Alexandra-Floyd 2012; Bilge 2013; Nash 2019).

My goal in this chapter is not to resolve debates about intersectionality, for contestation reflects an openness to change and can provoke new avenues of inquiry and action. I also do not seek to rescue intersectionality, not least because it is thriving as a field of inquiry and political discourse (for "good" and "evil") and does not need rescuing. Instead, I seek to foreground con-

tingency as a feature of intersectionality work and literacy to dislodge the kind of sedimented habits named above. As Stoler (2016) notes (in the context of [post]colonial studies), conceptual habits need to be constantly examined because

concepts emerge as seductive and powerful agents. They invite appropriation, quick citation, promising the authority that such invested affiliations are imagined to offer. They also invite unremarked omissions when their capacities to subsume are strained, a setting aside of what seems uneasy, partially, or awkwardly to “fit” with the analytic repertoire of cases that confirm both disciplinary protocols and ready analytical frames.
(2016, 8–9)

My starting place, in this chapter, is that intersectionality has too often journeyed as a sedimented concept that mutes its contingency. Yet, as I show later, the contingent character of intersectionality importantly orients strategies for radical political change.

To foreground contingency, I contend that intersectionality may well be complemented and changed by other frameworks, or even relegated to the margins when put into conversation or collision with other journeying concepts such as survivance, abolition, futurity, colonial unknowing, noncapitalist time, fugitivity, carcerality, neurodiversity, and sovereignty. How is intersectionality changed by such collisions? What investments might be interrogated when intersectionality work is deemed unchanged by the demand for the abolition of prisons and abolition of property? How do non-Western concepts that are not easily translatable in English, like the Sikh principle of *Ekk Onkaar* (the force of Oneness), collide against intersectionality? How might such collisions foster opportunities to question what we think we know about power or the world, and invite a rethinking of political change that seems incommensurable, partial, or awkward? In short, my argument is that conceptual and political *collision* is one way to foster intersectionality’s contingency.

In the first section, to foreground and sustain contingency as a central feature of intersectionality literacy and praxis, I propose that intersectionality be approached as a bundle of journeys geared toward social transformation. Next, to foreground contingency, I go on a bundle of journeys to explore what happens when intersectionality collides with, engages with, is rearranged by, and accumulates force from other concepts and other political trajectories for social change; this includes “place,” “a matrix of domination,” “animality,” “caste,” and “futures.” These are just examples of collisional concepts, and certainly not the only ones. I examine them specifically by drawing from Indigenous studies, Black feminist studies, gender and feminist studies, religious and decolonial studies, anti-caste studies, animal studies, and work on futures. I identify how intersectionality literacy and work, in and beyond the academy, can be transformed by these collisions, first to dislodge the cemented habits of intersectionality work and ward against certainty about what we know, or think we know; second, to punctuate the contingent character of intersectionality; and third, to signal what such collisions open up for the futures of intersectionality. By way of conclusion, I identify some of the analytical, epistemological, and political implications of collision for intersectionality’s contingent futures.

14.2 Contingent bundle of journeys

I intentionally use the language of “bundle of journeys” to orient intersectionality as a collection of wanderings, tours, voyages, or treks, such that scholars, students, activists, and policymakers engage in multiple practices of traveling from one place to another. For example, the bundle of journeys can encompass moving to and from intersectionality as a research paradigm, a political

goal, a pedagogical concept, and a liberal tool of categorization; or from legal theory to artistic expressions to policy articulations of intersectionality. By approaching intersectionality as a bundle of journeys, I am intentionally moving away from the idea that intersectionality is a method/practice/paradigm/commodity that has arrived or an object to be possessed.

Journeys of intersectionality are undertaken by journeyers, by actual people who navigate various transfer points, rerouting, double-backing, making unexpected crossings, and sometimes revisiting already-visited places. The experiences, ontologies, and epistemologies that contour our lives and lenses are always operational in how intersectionality is approached; this is not least because of our points of departure (what and who we choose to study/enact), our exiles (epistemic exclusions and marginalities), detentions and layovers (where and what we voluntarily or forcibly adopt or reject or part-adopt/part-reject about intersectionality), and arrivals (the conclusions we reach) are situated in place and time. Journeys are themselves contingent—my own journeys of intersectionality are informed by particular thinkers who came before me and made my journey possible, especially Black lesbian/queer feminists like Audre Lorde and the recently deceased bell hooks; contingency is evitable because other people’s journeys of intersectionality are shaped by other thinkers and other routes of travel such that our journeys are not the same.

Our journeys with/against/towards/outside intersectionality are shaped by who we travel with (e.g., which thinkers we align with), the mode of travel (e.g., at the register of policy or theory or organizing), and the temporal and spatial dimensions of our journeys (e.g., how long we have to engage with bodies of work on intersectionality, whether we are in institutional places like the academy or incarcerated in prisons). Furthermore, journeys can change a person in some way—transform how we think about ourselves and our communities, and how we relate to and speak of intersectionality, especially if the journey is precarious or even treacherous (e.g., as it can be for trans people of color in gender studies departments dominated by heteronormative feminists). In addition, journeys are not just shaped by itineraries/planned routes but also by how we *feel* and *experience* those journeys, such that the affective and embodied aspects of traveling alongside/through/frictionally with intersectionality become just as important as what is studied and where the journey is supposed to conclude, especially when met with resistance and hostility.

All of these aspects of journeying—the routes taken, the location/lens of analysts and practitioners, the temporal and spatial contexts, and affective and embodied experiences—are helpful reminders that *intersectionality is always and already contingently traveling* rather than a fixed, singular, or linear thing. Contingency is built into all political concepts, but because intersectionality is too often theorized and practiced with sedimented habits, its contingent character has become somewhat overshadowed and muted. But it is this contingency, I contend, that will shape the future of intersectionality. Jasbir Puar (2011), for example, rereads intersectionality through the (Deleuze and Guattari) conception of “assemblage,” which, in Puar’s use at least, is always and already contingent. Puar approaches the collision between assemblage and intersectionality via Crenshaw’s intersecting road metaphor, in which intersectional processes are multidirectional, liminal, and multicausal, rather than the more conventional (and misinterpreted) notion of fixed entities. For Puar, the collision punctuates that assemblage and intersectionality pose different conceptual problems. She states that “intersectionality attempts to comprehend political institutions and their attendant forms of social normativity and disciplinary administration, while assemblages, in an effort to reintroduce politics into the political, asks what is prior to and beyond what gets established” (2011, 8). Putting intersectionality and assemblages into conversation “can help us produce more roadmaps of precisely these not quite fully understood relations between discipline and control” (Puar 2011, 8). Puar goes on to state that assemblages focus on how populations and bodies are surveilled through affective tendencies and statistical probabili-

ties and that intersectional identitarian frames are complementary to assemblage because they sharpen focus on how identities and bodies are variously and contingently represented.

While Puar positions intersectionality as a potential complementary concept to assemblage, Lugones (1994) makes clear that a collision between her philosophy of “mestiza” and intersectionality shows that the two are incompatible. This is because mestiza is based on multiplicities and intersectionality is based on fragmentation. Lugones argues that “mestiza” is intrinsically more contingent than intersectionality because “fragmentation” (say of identities) follows the logic of purity of imagining that there are composite parts that can be pulled apart (Lugones 1994, 463), whereas “multiplicity” follows the logic of “curdling” in which there is festive action to resist control and purity. Lugones pivots mestiza on the “resistant oppressed” as a circumscribed political ethos “that defies control through simultaneously asserting the impure, curdled multiple states and rejecting fragmentation into pure parts” (Lugones 1994, 460). In other words, the collision between mestiza and intersectionality reveals (1) that there are in fact no pieces that intersect, for this would assume a separability that is fused to subjectification; and (2) that, therefore, positivist and deconstructivist accounts of intersectional identities and subjects do not make sense. In short, collision illuminates that mestiza enables more contingency and elasticity than intersectionality by disrupting modernist modes of categorizational control and rule. These are just two examples of work that already explore intersectionality’s collisions with other radical concepts (although Puar and Lugones do not frame it as collision.)

14.3 Intersectionality’s collisions

14.3.1 Collision with “Indigenous place”: illuminating Indigenous sovereignty, political change beyond nation-states, and solidarities

Matters of intersectionality map onto places and spaces of mobility and containment (via prisons, border controls, enclosures of reserves, segregated neighborhoods), including immigration, work, study, state-sanctioned violence, global/local/national neoliberal market competition and trade, war and invasion, forced migration, and walls and borders rooted in imperial histories and forces. In journeying with/through/against intersectionality, accounts of “place” squarely put Indigeneity on the agenda, not only because in settler contexts (like the US, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) intersectionality inquiries, practices, and oppressions are always literally operating on (stolen/unceded/treaty) Indigenous lands but also because Indigenous feminist/womanist work is grounded in intertwined dynamics of land and place, anticolonialism, decoloniality, nationhood, gender, and the body (Hunt 2013; Monture 1999; Stark 2019). For instance, in her conception of “Red Intersectionality,” Clark (2016) emphasizes local and traditional tribal/nation-based teachings, intergenerational connection across time, and the diversity of girls, women, Two-Spirit, and trans people. In centering Two-Spirit subjectivity, Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) scholar Laura Hall (2017) offers the frame of “Indigenist intersectionality.” In their approach to “decolonizing feminism” Arvin, Tuck, and Morill (2013) emphasize the connections between settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy.

Precisely because Indigenous relationships, ontologies, and epistemologies are situated in place, they are also context- and philosophically contingent. How Kanien’kehá:ka Indigeneist intersectionality operates on Mohawk homelands may not be the same as how it operates on *lək̓ʷə̀k̓wə̀ŋən* (Songhees and Esquimalt) lands because each nation has its own ontologies on how to approach people who are from elsewhere. Even within Kanien’kehá:ka, Indigeneist intersectionality will vary because colonialism has had various and differential impacts on members of this First Nation. Moreover, when intersectionality collides with Indigenous place, there

are a number of epistemological and political implications because, for Indigenous peoples, place gives meaning to culture, language, relationships, creation stories, ceremony, law, and decolonial and resurgence practices. The collision specifically entails that scholars/practitioners/activists of intersectionality must transcend the man–nature divide and integrate cosmological, ecological, and spiritual worldviews into intersectional theories; be open to models of political change that go beyond inclusion in the nation–state because the nation–state is premised on the logic of Indigenous genocide (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013); and that colonizing systems of racist-capitalist-homophobic patriarchy (e.g., a fixed binary-based nuclear family) are undone through Indigenous systems of governance that are ontologically deviant from Western models. Put differently, because Indigenous feminist approaches to place are premised on matters of self-determination, (tribal, national, bodily) sovereignty should be integrated into intersectionality work.

We might ask then, what is revealed about intersectionality through the lens of Indigenous sovereignty, and vice versa?¹ What counter-relationships become possible when we take into account the governance of Indigenous places by Indigenous nations in intersectionality-related work? The answer to this, I contend, is contingent on how local Indigenous people practice place-based sovereignty and the particular forces of power at play. For instance, rather than protesting against police violence, in June 2020, various local Indigenous Anishinaabekwe women focused their attention on showing care for local Black people by conducting the Jingle dress ceremony at the intersection of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue in Minneapolis, the place where George Floyd was killed by police. Indigenous and Black people emphasized connections and solidarities without collapsing their different and differential experiences. The solidarities were understood as contingently formed, such that the *specificities* of anti-Black racism are linked to the *specificities* of Indigenous place.

14.3.2 Intersectionality’s collisions with the “matrix of power”: going beyond “the intersection” to the connective tissue

While work that focuses on a specific intersection is important, I propose that contingent intersectionality journeys attune attention to the relations and forces of power *between* multiple “intersections/interactions/intermeshings” and the shifting networks of power, rather than the intersections themselves (even if the intersection is conceptualized as fluid and messy). Drawing from bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins signaled the importance of the relationship between intersections and the broader frame of power with “the matrix of domination,” which Collins states “describes this overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained” (2000, 227). Building from Collins, I also developed the idea of “a matrix of meaning-making,” in which the overall organization of *productive*, disciplinary, and repressive intersecting forces of power—and hence not only oppressive power—originates, develops, and is contained (Dhamoon (2009)).

When intersectionality collides with “a matrix of domination” or “a matrix of meaning-making,” the focus shifts from specific intersections to the variously shifting and circumscribed practices, policies, and scholarly work that are attentive to (1) the oscillating relations and forces *between* intersections and (2) *how* these relations differently and differentially uphold/dismantle/exist outside of matrices of power. And this shift can open up directions for political change. As I have shown elsewhere (Dhamoon 2019), when the intersection itself is decentered, the focus of critique can move to matrices of rule and control that operate for the purposes of variously and simultaneously governing intermeshed forms of Othering, what she calls “relational Othering.” This method “attunes attention to the interactive processes of re/making, re/organizing, and managing *subjugating formations of difference which operate not only in contexts of dominance but in relation to*

one another as well” (2, original emphasis). In other words, this collision highlights how different marginalizing subjectivities are relationally and relatively deployed in the service of rule and control. This is important because it shows the need for engaging in three-dimensional, rather than two-dimensional, analysis (in her case Chinese temporary workers—particular Indigenous nations—dominant state actors); and because it highlights that the conditions of connection and solidarity between seemingly disparate groups (Chinese temporary foreign workers and Indigenous nations) will also be contingent on circumscribed forces of repressive, disciplinary, and productive power.

14.3.3 Collisions with “animality” and more-than-human life: disrupting human-centrism

Contingent journeys of intersectionality can also extend beyond humans as the subjects of analysis and action. This can include animate life such as nonhuman animals, plant and sea life, molecular life, microorganisms (e.g., bacteria, archaea, protists), and megaviruses (e.g., COVID-19). In her analysis of nonhuman animals and the law, Deckha argues that intersecting experiences of gender, race, sexuality, and ability “are often based on and take shape through speciesist ideas of humanness vis-à-vis animality” (2009, 249) and that ideas about animals and animality (such as civilization versus savage) historically shape core ideas of intersectionality, i.e., culture, gender, and race. Deckha’s work demonstrates that a collision between intersectionality and radical ideas about nonhuman life intentionally violates the normalized animal/human boundaries set by the mainstream, so as to critically examine individual and public discourses about hierarchies of “animals” (think of humans, domesticated animals, “wild” animals), gendered cultural anxieties rooted in frontier masculinity, and the “species grid that organizes so many conditions often modernity” (Deckha 2009, 259). As Deckha states, “intersectionality itself needs to resist the comfort of the humanist paradigm and reach across the species divide” (2009, 267). If we take Deckha’s point on speciesism seriously we must develop new, more flexible, and contingent grammars to think about the richness and diversity of nonhuman life as a feature of intersectionality.

The contingency of intersectionality journeys with nonhuman life also lies in how human and nonhuman life is ontologically conceptualized. Communities that already have lexicon and systems of thought that integrate nonhuman and human relations will be differently conditioned toward speciesism in ways that expand the realm of politics. For example, drawing on their Indigenous ontologies, Driftpile Cree Nation member, Billy Ray Belcourt (2014), shows that European colonialism requires the biopolitical and geopolitical management of not only people but also land, flora, and fauna via private animal agriculture, zoos, butcher shops, slaughterhouses, and factory farms—all of which position nonhuman animal bodies within economies human food and commodity production. Belcourt’s argument further reveals that Indigenous life is not about making nonhuman animality the same as human difference, but about Indigenous cosmologies that account for nonhuman animal bodies as resurgent bodies; indeed, animality is centered in Indigenous cosmologies and epistemologies, where they are often portrayed as siblings to humans and have agency to create kinship relations. Drawing from Belcourt, a collision between intersectionality and animality not only undoes intersectionality’s own ontological assumptions about human centrality, but also illuminates that anthropocentrism is an intersecting logic of white supremacy and settler colonialism that assumes humanity as its standard subject position.

Moreover, when the force of Indigenous ontologies of animality collides with intersectionality, alternative pathways for building life-enhancing practices are opened. Cree scholar and filmmaker Tasha Hubbard, for instance, specifies the role of the bison on the prairies as educa-

tors and shows that this role was disrupted by the specific conditions of colonialism that are not universalizable but contingent on abuses of power, agendas of profit, and settlement. Her analysis shows that it is the prairie context of bison ecocide by settlers (who killed an estimated 30–60 million bison in the late 1800s and early 1900s to make fine bone china dinner sets, to trade, and to clear and claim the land for a new railway) that stands in contrast with Indigenous relations with bison as equals, kin, healers, guardians, and teachers. For Hubbard, life-enhancing practices transcend intersectional attention on oppression in ways that reassert the sacredness of bison through Indigenous ceremonies, dances and songs, seasonal cycles, stories, treaties, and places. One example of this kind of practice is the 2014 Buffalo Treaty, an intertribal alliance to restore bison to 6.3 million acres of the US and Canada and to bring a unified voice among the buffalo nations and tribes in partnerships with governments, researchers, and conservation groups.

The focus on bison, the place of the prairies, and settler violence is not the same across all Indigenous ontologies, further illuminating the contingencies of more-than-human intersecting realms. For example, Joanne Barker (2019), a Lenape professor, attends to water as important to human survival and also as a life-giver with supernatural power, as an Indigenous feminist analytical method, and as a sentient with autonomous agency and intergenerational knowledge; the Kwakwaka'wakw people hold a Salmon Ceremony every year at the beginning of the salmon run, in part shaped by their proximity to rivers and the Pacific Ocean; and the Inuit engage in small-scale culturally specific seal hunting all over the Arctic as a local food source that is nutritional, for clothing, for their livelihoods, and their harvest ceremony and celebrations to honor the souls of seals. In other words, humans and more-than-human relations are contingently shaped by culture, place, ceremony, and stories of diverse Indigenous peoples. Indigenous ontologies also prompt me to ask how might inanimate life such as rocks or mountains as sacred sites/relations, or dreams or stars change intersectionality journeys, or do its sedimented habits make intersectionality an irrelevant lens in such instances?

14.3.4 “Caste” collisions with intersectionality: transnationalizing politics and internationalist solidarities

Caste is an exclusionary system of ranking people into groups based on spiritual and cultural purity. It is an apartheid system created in Hindu scripture in which Brahmins are at the top of the caste system and have benefit from subjugating those placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, namely Dalits, who are branded “untouchable,” polluted, and impure and segregated in neighborhoods, places of worship, and schools (Soundararajan 2020, n.p.). As a system, caste determines ritualized ideas of labor, intelligence, marriage, and religion. Caste is often (wrongly) taken to be a problem just in South Asia, specifically India where Brahmanism is structured into institutions of rule and control, but it affects more than 260 million people worldwide and travels wherever the Indian diaspora travels, including Western contexts (Soundararajan 2020, n.p.).

When journeying across heterogeneous non-Western contexts, intersectionality literacy and work are consistent with anti-casteist work that focuses on under-examined aspects of intermeshed structural oppression. Some Dalit feminists, such as Kiruba Munusamy (2018), have applied intersectionality thinking to challenge the intermeshed ways that queer Dalit women and Dalit trans people are discriminated against, sexually assaulted, raped, beaten, and brutally murdered because of casteism in present-day India. Munusamy illustrates the interactions between lived experiences of gender, gender identity, caste, colorism, class, religion, and geography in the context of gender and trans violence in India to argue that gender is caste and caste is gender.

Further, when caste collides with intersectionality in diaspora contexts, both analytics and points of organizing accumulate force from one another, such that the connections between national and transnational registers of politics gain saliency. For instance, not only did the 2020 nomination of Kamala Harris as the Democratic vice-president candidate in the US evoke her gender, Black and mixed-race (Indian Tamil and Black Jamaican), and woman of color identities, but she also faced criticism for failing to address her own Brahmin caste privilege. In particular, a collision between caste and intersectionality punctuated the relevance of global Hindutva fascist ideology in America so that caste was not just another intersection but one that disrupted the hegemony of Western discourses of race and gender as the primary intersections. Furthermore, race and gender are themselves changed when approached through the lens of caste. Indeed, while in the US “Caste focuses in on the infrastructure of our divisions and the rankings, whereas race is the metric that’s used to determine one’s place in that” (Wilkerson, 2020), both have the same logic of enslaving and subjugating Black people and Dalit-Bahujan people while placing white Europeans on the top of the socio-political hierarchy.

In addition, a collision between caste and intersectionality also sheds light on contradictions of subjectivity. To take the example of Kamala Harris again, she claimed to be a human rights defender on the one hand (she is also criticized for actively implementing a “tough on crime” approach during her time as a prosecutor, district attorney, and state attorney general that swelled prison populations, especially of Black and Latinx people) while also ignoring caste-based human rights violations in India, especially as a member of the upper caste. Caste necessitates that the sphere of politics goes beyond the nation-state of the US not only because of global caste oppression but also because diasporas *in* the US bring with them caste histories and normalized cultural practices (such as who to marry, choice of religious institutions, and eating habits). In foregrounding a richer understanding of local and global connections, across nation-state borders, a critical anti-casteist stance also fosters the need for global political coalitions. Indeed, among others, Soundrarajan, Angela Davis, Cornel West, and Zoe Samuldi foreground intersecting and intermeshed synergies of power and futures in their approaches to building internationalist solidarities and transnational movements toward caste abolition, prison abolition, police abolition, and Indigenous sovereignty, especially by emphasizing that Black, Indigenous, and Dalit histories and relations are globally connected. Such connections not only change our views of history and contemporary relations of power but can also foster cross-issue alliances that are contingently formed on the basis of issues rather than fixed identities.

14.3.5 Positive futurities: affirmations of life

Over recent years, there has been a burgeoning literature on futurities which has shifted attention from past and present traumas that have arisen through modern forms of oppression, such as colonialism, to considering “a future centric engagement with the past that opens up the present to new political, cultural, and ethical possibilities” (Eshel 2013). Whether through dance, film, cultural productions, speculative fiction, poetry, art, or theory, the work that loosely falls under the umbrella of “futurities” attunes attention to radically (re)imagining different and alternative worlds. As Black, Latina/Chicana, Indigenous, and Asian feminists in the US (including the Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Frances Beal, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua, Yuri Kochiyama, and Maria Lugones) and lesser-known feminists outside the US (such as Maria Campbell, Gulab Kaur, and the Southall Sisters) have long argued, social and political life is not limited by just resisting/opposing rule and control—it is also about generating and sustaining life-giving practices beyond existing systems of rule and control.

The concept of futurities rubs against intersectionality in several ways, two of which I briefly explore here. First, futurities reorient the focus from oppressive/carceral/fatal aspects of life to those that are affirmative and life-sustaining. These “positive” dimensions are taken up by Singh, who argues that “religious women’s agency not only exposes an ambiguity at the heart of intersectionality between identity and oppression, but also challenges several aspects of intersectionality studies” (2015, 657). In particular, while not opposed to intersectionality, Singh is critical of those intersectionality scholars who turn away from identity politics in favor of a structural critique of power. His critique raises two important questions: first, how might intersectionality work open up space for diverse notions and practices of oppression and liberation that do not rely on “anti-oppression” as the primary normative framework, or on projects of feminist emancipation that presume the primary goal is secular-human opposition/resistance to structural power? Second, what challenges and lessons do studies of religious agency provide to work on and root in intersectionality, and how does this change intersectionality’s orientation toward positive ethical and political horizons? While, at times, Singh collapses into the very oppression/liberation dyad that he seeks to critique—there is a slippage that identities are singularly oppressive or affirming rather than subjectively or atypically varied and shifting (i.e., contingent), such that he maintains a binary of negative/positive—his general point is an important one. What could intersectionality bring to conversations around “positive” or “affirmative” identities, including the agentic life of religious identities? And what contingent claims about affirmative identities can be made in the context of variations across political systems and regimes, cultures, geopolitical borders, genders, and neoliberal global hierarchies?

Second, I contend that collisions between the idea of futurities *exceed* journeys of intersectionality. By this, I mean that intersectionality is a social justice tool that seeks to make room for *past and present* antidiscrimination, advocacy, remedial practices, and egalitarianism. Intersectionality literacy and work have helped to illuminate and address inequities facing those on the margins, both historically and contemporarily. In advancing Black feminist technology studies, Noble, for instance, notes that “the field of information and communication studies has not sufficiently responded to or benefited from intersectional lenses such as black queer feminist interventions” (2016, n.p.). By applying intersectionality to this field of study, Noble is able to critique national and transnational neoliberalism, globalized communications infrastructure that is based on extractive practices of Africa and the Global South, corporate exploitation of Black labor, and how inequities of wealth and power bind local communities to others around the globe. For Noble, internet studies rooted in intersectional Black studies not only widen the scope of analyzing the political economy of global blackness but also connect the interest of Black/African Americans to Africa and shed light on contemporary power embedded in globalization, surveillance, and in liberation movements.

Positive futurities, on the other hand, exceed intersectionality’s temporality in that there is a move toward seeking otherwise worlds and alternative ways of living *beyond present violence and past traumas* and *beyond what Elliot (2021, 1) calls “static time”* or “an experience of time in which human agency is no longer operative because meaningful change cannot be created.” The future can be about enacting individual and collective agency to dream and imagine sustainable, caring, materially fair communities. Radical Black traditions of abolition politics, for example, are driven by dreams of worlds without slavery, prisons, policing, and surveillance. Everyday life is reimagined as more communal and caring through non-Western modes of mutual aid, such as community-based money pools called *sol* in Haiti, *susu* in Ghana, *box hand* in Guyana, *jama* in Kenya, *hagbad* in Somalia, and *kamitee* in my Sikh-Punjabi family. Transformative justice movements are rooted in building worlds of anti-violence that prioritize harm reduction and healing for all involved, rather than punishment and removal of abusers. And Haudenosaunee (Iroquois)

philosophy is based on the Seven Generations teaching, in which decisions (about energy, water, natural resources, human relationships, international diplomacy, etc.) today, about human and nonhuman life, are made with an eye to how they affect seven generations into the future. None of these are uniform or devoid of tensions arising from forces of power, but they are oriented toward paradigm shifts about how we live together. And precisely because futures cannot be predetermined or fixed in advance, they are intrinsically contingent.

14.4 Conclusion

If intersectionality is a contingent idea, ideograph, concept, analytic, paradigm, politic, or praxis (take your pick!) that serves to enhance journeys of social transformation—as opposed to a final destination—then there is room for the kind of openings that the above trajectories create. *Analytically*, a commitment to contingency suggests that the trilogy of racism–classism–patriarchy (which, from my perspective, are intrinsic to intersectionality work) is neither automatic nor universalistic, but also not irrelevant either. Indeed, the above trajectories may well extend “the intersections” that are examined to be attentive (to name a few) to place, caste, agentic identities, speciesism, and anthropocentrism, as well as non-Western ideas about religion, transgender and nonbinary genders, the cosmos, nonhuman life, and futurities. Furthermore, to attend to the operation and effects of matrices of power, intersectionality journeys could encompass three-dimensional and not only two-dimensional analysis, because patterns of differentiation are contingently managed, rearranged, and resisted according to how subjugations are relationally and relatively organized in/through/against one another, and not only in contexts of domination. Collision also reveals that subjectification and subjectivity are always and already contingent across time, space, and lens, such that the modernist demand to definitively categorize identities and groups into bounded entities makes no sense. Yet, while institutions and state laws continue to rule and control people and social relations through categories (rather than, say, diffuse assemblages), intersectional categories and identities of oppression and privilege cannot be ignored either, especially when marginalized groups are seeking recognition of, for example, caste or transgender identity.

Epistemologically, contingency is enacted by interrogating the stakes, imperatives, investments, and function of knowledge produced in the name of intersectionality. This praxis invites a commitment to what Carastathis refers to as “epistemic mutiny” and May calls “epistemic defiance,” and what I think of as “resurgent epistemic curiosity.” Epistemic mutiny invites a refusal of “institutionalized or ‘ornamental’ [intersectionality]; iterations of the term that announce the completion of a putatively postracial feminism” (Carastathis 2016, 211). Epistemic defiance resists epistemic hegemony and challenges epistemologies of ignorance (May 2015, chapter 5), especially for those whose lives are deemed obscure and anomalous by the dominant society. Resurgent epistemic curiosity is grounded in the premise that Black women’s embodied knowledge cannot be divorced from intersectionality, nor should it be fetishized; intersectionality is neither an empty vessel that should carry everything nor territory that must be guarded and protected through requisite Black feminist vigilance and stewardship (Alexander–Floyd 2012; Bilge 2020; Collins and Bilge 2016; Hancock 2015; Nash 2019). Instead, bundled journeys of intersectionality entail a genuine willingness to foreground what Collins calls “connected knowers” (2000, 258), in which even connected knowers carry only partial (and therefore contingent) knowledge; interrogating how knowledge-making reinforces circumscribed relations of subjection and privilege; questioning epistemologies that are framed as intersectional; and acknowledging that positivist and deconstructivist accounts of identity and subjectivity do not make sense in light of contingent-specific claims.

Politically, the above trajectories orient the journeys of intersectionality in particular ways. First, contingency points toward situating knowledge-production processes in place, specifically to take into account local Indigenous sovereignty and relationship to place. Second, examining the connective tissue of matrices of power shows that group histories and experiences are not isolated and independent silos with autonomous domains of politics, but instead disjointedly connected through divisions of labor, hierarchies of precariousness, modes of nation-building, and patterns of resistance; tracking these connections can foster contingent internationalist solidarities and transnational movements that are issue-driven rather than driven by a shared identity. Third, the materiality of doing, and expected to do, intersectionality-type work should be remunerated by institutions (how much more “free” labor do Black women need to do to teach us this!), and this could be an action item to organize around if the labor of advocating did not just fall on the backs of non-white women. Indeed, the argument that racism is a workload issue (Dhamoon 2020)—and not only a human rights, discrimination, or equity issue—could be extended to approach intersectionality as a workload issue that should be compensated by employers, such as through pay, time off, and adjusted workloads. Fourth, activities advanced under the umbrella of intersectionality can, and should, transcend and even reject the nation-state as a site of change—indeed, some Indigenous sovereignties specifically call for refusals of state sovereignty (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013); critical intersectionality literacy and work need not be confined to being more inclusive, for its contingency makes it more responsive to different kinds of political strategies. Put differently, agentic affirmations of life cannot rely on the state when it is in the business of having a monopoly over coercion and control via police, military, and border agents, as movements like Idle No More and Black Lives Matter show. Fifth, in mapping political actions, we should ask how to transcend the man–nature divide and integrate cosmological, ecological, and spiritual worldviews. Finally, political imperatives could exceed the register of oppression, and instead, connect the past and present to alternative possible futures that are life-sustaining and life-affirming. The point may be obvious, but just to be clear—intersectionality may well be only one of many critical analytic tools, and need not be the primary one for disrupting power or creating alternatives to rule and control. Moreover, perhaps ironically for a chapter in a book on intersectionality, a commitment to contingency also means that the value/utility/place of intersectionality as a theory, analytic, or practice is itself not inevitably necessary for political change. Indeed, the radicality of intersectionality’s contingency is that it can open pathways to *reimagining the world beyond intersectionality itself*, to dream Otherwise.

Note

- 1 Importantly, I am not suggesting that intersectionality is *required* to understand the complexities of Indigenous knowledge, not only because Western worldviews (even critical ones) can be alienating but because Indigenous epistemologies encompass their own conceptions of multiplicity.

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15

WHO'S AFRAID OF IDENTITY?

Intersectionality and the struggle for, against, and beyond identity

Ashley Bohrer

In both the denunciations of intersectionality on the right and the appropriation of it by liberal capitalist institutions, identity is taken to be something clear, unitary, and uncomplicated.

When the right anti-identitarians lambast proponents of intersectionality (as well as critical race theory, and other identity-forward frameworks), the critique is often that it is wrong, either analytically or morally, to reduce people to their identities. We are all *individuals*, they tell us, and, echoing Margaret Thatcher's famous proclamation, "there is no society"; it's individuals all the way down.¹ Positioning themselves as the true inheritors of feminist and antiracist struggle, we are told that what is truly oppressive is continuing to bring up identity, which is the true cause of its reproduction. If we would only quit lumping people together in groups, we could finally achieve a post-racial and post-sexist state where (finally, we are told), people are judged on the basis of their own character and achievements. Intersectionality, on these accounts, is perhaps the worst of all identity theories because it insists on adding even more identitarian signifiers than before, not only with regard to race and gender, but also sexuality, ability, citizenship status, and others.

The liberal, capitalist appropriation of intersectionality likewise takes identity as a rather uncomplicated terrain. Reducing demands of intersectional justice and liberation to claims about representation, the 21st century has become replete with institutions and corporations promoting or hiring a handful of oppressed people and/or paying for a DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) consultant to run a training or two and thus declaring the structural conditions of oppression to be fully vanquished within their halls.²

While the strategies, aims, and discourses of each of these approaches differ, they do have one important similarity: they each position intersectionality as a theory of uncomplicated identity. In the right-wing version, all identity talk is reductive because it sees the individual as the bearer of larger webs and networks of power (which, of course, is required in order to recognize or critique *any* structural condition whatsoever). In this sense, identity can only be thought of as the *oppression* that is structured through *certain* social locations. Identity is thus uncomplicated for the right in the sense that it is univocal, meaning only the reduction of people to group membership beyond their control. While the liberal version of intersectionality is positioned in some ways as diametrically opposed, it also treats identity as something easy and uncomplicated. For the liberal, identity is wholly individual. For this reason, truly structural analyses of power are

shoved aside in favor of piecemeal solutions that focus on individuals (promoting/hiring them or training individuals to behave in specific ways).

While intersectionality is deployed in both of these discourses, as a whole, their understandings of identity could not be further from the ideas of the activists and scholars who have developed it. Rather, what I would like to dramatize in this chapter is that despite the heterogeneity of the intersectional tradition,³ in general, identity is much better conceived as a contested site. In other words, what identity is and how it should be deployed in the struggle for a more just world is one of the central *questions* of the intersectional tradition, or as Jennifer Morgan put it recently in a quite different context, a “predicament,” rather than a starting premise. Upon closer inspection, I believe we can see that the intersectional tradition is replete with rich discussions of both how we inherit norms and categories of identity that limit, control, and police, as well as ways that identity can open possibilities for self-understanding, community empowerment, collective joy, and revolutionary struggle. From my perspective, it is precisely this dynamic tension at the heart of the intersectional tradition that makes it such a powerful tool for analysis and activism.

The dynamic and conflictual (one could even say dialectical) nature of identity in the intersectional tradition, does not, however, mean that “anything goes!” Taking up Patricia Hill Collins’s suggestion to think about intersectionality as “a critical theory in the making,”⁴ I especially want to meditate on the dialogical, provisional, and contested relationship between the intersectional tradition and the praxis of identity. French theorist Michel Foucault once described these kinds of engagements as opening up a “space of problematization.”⁵ Rather than deploying a “form of critique that claims to be a methodical examination in order to reject all possible solutions except for the one valid one,” a space of problematization illuminates “a domain of acts, practices, and thoughts that ... pose problem for politics.”⁶ A space of problematization denotes a clearing in which the central conflicts of identity in this case can be reckoned with. By reckoning here I mean truly *grappled with*, rather than settled once and for all. One of the things that I argue makes intersectionality distinct from other social justice theories, even ones intimately concerned with issues of identity, is its *reckoning* with identity, not in order to come to some once-and-for-all conclusion, not to lock it into one place in theorizing or in struggle, but to hold onto it as an important *problem* for contemporary liberation politics.⁷

15.1 The struggle for identity

Perhaps it is counterintuitive to start here, with the aspect of intersectionality that might most resemble the position I’m arguing against. But in a very real sense, identity politics in general and intersectionality in particular contain elements of struggling *for* identity: for the recognition of identity as an important part of collective life, for the achievement of group consciousness in struggles against oppression, in some cases also for the creation and dissemination of terms that can help cohere communities and identity. Even when the content of identities is thought of as fluid, provisional, and open to change, the ability to take up a name for an imagined and projected collectivity can often facilitate community in this way, communities that can aid in self-understanding, share wisdom, engage in collective self-defense, mutual aid, politicization, consciousness raising, direct action, as well as the creation of spaces of art, vitality, and joy.

Part of the intersectional struggle for identity is the struggle to have identity categories recognized as complex, partial, or complicated unities, composed of heterogeneous experiences and relationships to power (in many forms, including but not limited to the law). In particular, one of the ideas that the intersectional tradition has brought so compellingly to the fore is the conceptualization of identity as itself a coalition. Rather than conceive of identity as a starting

point, understanding identity as a coalition begins from the uncertainty and instability of these categories, and often of our own uneasy position within them. In this sense, Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that intersectionality “requires that we first recognize that the organized identity groups in which we find ourselves are in fact coalitions, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed.”⁸ Vivian May thus argues that a politics of coalition is integral to the definition of intersectionality, which she defines as encompassing “a radical political orientation grounded in solidarity, rather than sameness.”⁹ It is in this sense that both Crenshaw and Anna Carastathis argue that identities should themselves be conceived as coalitions.¹⁰ While many intersectionality theorists critique so-called coalitions that require de-emphasizing differences in position, power, and experiences, they emphasize that working in true coalitions—ones that honor, foreground, and learn from these difference as a source of power—is a central theme of intersectionality scholarship. Recognizing that forming coalitions based on honoring difference is a difficult political praxis, Chandra Mohanty emphasizes that intersectional coalitions are “always an achievement, the result of active struggle.”¹¹

The struggle for identity is also the struggle to have non-dominant epistemologies and knowledges recognized and affirmed on their own terms. Collins argues that foregrounding subjugated knowledges in this way is not merely about beginning to undo the centuries of erasure and marginalization of (in her case) Black women’s voices, but also about harnessing their words in order to “explicat[e] how knowledge remains central to maintaining and changing unjust systems of power.”¹² Thus, standpoint epistemology as developed by Collins is explanatory in two senses: it both renders visible knowledge that has, in her words, been “subjugated”¹³ but it also exposes the way that power operates intersectionally, by producing a specific standpoint for Black women that cannot be rendered by class-only, race-only, or gender-only approaches to understanding the relationship between power and knowledge. This commitment to illuminated “sedimented contextual knowledges”¹⁴ is continued in the works of not only several academic intersectionality theorists but in the daily work of activist struggle.

The intersectional tradition also demands that those who *think* they have no relevant identity recognize that they *in fact* do. One of the ways that dominant identities are allowed to function in the contemporary world is by being taken as the default or the norm; white supremacy allows white people to think of themselves as individuals rather than beneficiaries of structural white supremacy, just as cis-hetero-patriarchy does for cis people, men, and straight people. Able-bodied and neuro-normative people can see their achievements, access to resources, and life opportunities not as the result of ableist norms and power, but as the result of their own individual choices and hard work. This strategy is one of the central mechanisms through which power in our society hides itself, by allowing those who benefit from structures of oppression and exploitation to not see themselves as the beneficiaries of group power. Linda Martín Alcoff and Charles Mills have significantly advanced the understanding of “white ignorance” as itself a political tool of domination, oppression, and exploitation.¹⁵ Whether feigned or maliciously maintained, those who amass power and wealth in our society often can claim plausible deniability that their gender, race, sexuality, class position, etc., were central in their success (especially in the current neoliberal order which places the “individual” above all else). In this sense, part of the intersectional tradition is the struggle for those with dominant identities to recognize their lives as being significantly shaped by group membership at all. Of course, the normative goal of intersectionality is the undoing of this violent group power. But one of the strategies that intersectional organizing and critique have often taken up is recognizing the necessity of those in power recognizing that they *also participate in group memberships* and that those identities, whether actively chosen or simply passively inhabited, have a significant impact on one’s life possibilities and opportunities.

While I focused thus far on the elements of the struggle for identity in the analytical register, intersectionality is also deeply interconnected to social movements and political struggle; several strands of intersectional organizing also confirm the necessity of struggling *for* identity.

In the first place, as Crenshaw explored in some of her early work, when single-axis identity politics dominate social movements, difference is suppressed, often further marginalizing those with the least amount of social power. In her classic examples, the mainstream feminist movement tended to assume a married, heterosexual, middle-class white woman as the default subject and demand the social changes most important to someone of that social position. Likewise, the civil rights movement in her account tended to specifically focus on the needs and contours of racism as it related to straight Black men, conceptualizing the problem of racism and the necessary solutions on that basis. In both cases, Crenshaw shows, Black women's unique position is overlooked and therefore left out of the very social movements attempting to combat systemic oppression.

But moreover, Audre Lorde reveals another valence to this strategic benefit, which in her analysis is located in the ability of activists to bring their whole selves to organizing when projects are no longer based on lowest-common-denominator politics:

As a Black lesbian feminist, I find I am constantly encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other arts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly ... Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living.¹⁶

Approaching this work from the perspective that multiple groups have strengths that can be leveraged and understandings that might speak to different constituencies expands the terrain of what is possible. When we embrace a political perspective that allows us to enter into organizing spaces in all of our particularities, without forcing ourselves to be reduced to that which is shared with others, we unleash the creativity that comes from being our whole selves, as complex, contradictory, or broken as those selves might be. With this creativity comes not only novel approaches, deeper diagnoses, and the experiences of multiple histories of struggle, it potentially lays the foundation for building new communities, ones in which difference is taken as a source of strength rather than as barriers to collective action. As Himani Bannerji remarks, "Communities of resistance, therefore, are or need to be much more than imagined."¹⁷

15.2 The struggle against identity

It should be clear that the kind of identity politics demanded by the intersectional tradition diverges greatly from the contemporary power structures that benefit from exploitation and oppression. Certainly, white supremacy, coloniality, cis-hetero-patriarchy, and ableism are identity politics of a specific kind—a repressive, oppressive, and exploitative identity politics. In this sense, intersectionality as a normative theory is centrally committed to uprooting the reigning identity politics. Intersectionality is not a mere analytical framework or critical theory; it is centrally aimed at the transformation of the world, not merely its exposition. As such, and this cannot be overemphasized, intersectionality positions itself directly against identity in the sense it is given to us in the world as it is. The intersectional tradition moves against the reigning politics of identity by working against the current, identitarian distribution of access to resources, opportunities, power, epistemological or testimonial reliability, care, grievability, safety, and life. The

intersectional tradition is positioned directly against the structural conditions and interpersonal replications that give rise to an identity-based distribution of life and death. As noted above, this does not mean that the intersectional tradition simply *rejects* identity or its power, but it does mean that intersectionality is positioned against some of the most central aspects of identity as contemporarily practiced in societies of domination such as ours.

More concretely, this plays out in a variety of ways. For one, the intersectional tradition rejects forms of identity and identity policing based on stereotypes and projections. Patricia Hill Collins's groundbreaking study of controlling images¹⁸ dramatized the necessity of breaking down the repressive archetypes imposed on oppressed peoples for the intersectional project. Analyzing and rejecting the projections of what identity means is thus a central part of the intersectional tradition. But moreover, what Collins demonstrates in this text is that it is not only possible but necessary from an intersectional perspective to simultaneously *reject*, for example, the controlling images of Black womanhood while unflinchingly *affirming* Black women, as individuals and as a collective. Intersectionality demands such a complicated negotiation of identity, simultaneously struggling *against* identity as imposed by the ruling order and *affirming* the possibilities of insurgent identities.

It is for this reason that intersectionality does also engage in the struggle against being reduced to one's group membership. The intersectional tradition, as one that operates simultaneously on the macro, meso, and micro levels, emphasizes being able to see simultaneously (and as dialectically intertwined) the individual that I am and the groups to which I belong. Moving beyond the stale opposition between the structuralist view of identity as group-based membership beyond individuals and the post-structuralist insistence on the freedom and agency of the individual, the intersectional tradition takes a sensitive "both-and" position; we are inextricably influenced and shaped by our identities. And yet, we are also not simply passive incarnations of structural patterns and coercive impositions. Neither of these normative understandings of identity can adequately capture the complex process of negotiation between self and society that an adequate understanding of our uneasy emplacement in the world truly demands. The intersectional tradition has perhaps no equal in being able to articulate the messy simultaneity of both being an individual and the limits of a purely individual analysis.

For this reason, the intersectional tradition also specifically argues against all essentialist conceptions of identity and identification processes. Essentialist understandings of identity tended to dominate thinking about identity politics in the 20th century (and one might argue, still today in many places). Broadly speaking, essentialism asserts some universal core essence (biological, cultural, etc.) that defines group membership; it grounds group membership in a certain amount of ahistorical uniformity. This makes a certain amount of sense—identity, at least in its classical sense, *means* sameness; it is thus unsurprising (even if unsatisfying) that many theories of identity would hinge on some definition of the self-same. While the content of essentialists' categorizations might differ, their fundamental theory of identity is one based on sameness, uniformity, and homogeneity. Contrary to both right and left essentialisms (left essentialism sometimes masquerades, confusingly, under the term "counter-essentialism"), thinkers in the intersectional traditions tend to view identity less as a stable, obvious, ahistorical, and eternal core and much more as a fluid, negotiated, contextual, and historical process, one that is by definition open to change and transformation. Because oppression, exploitation, privilege, and power are real things in the world with important effects on both inter- and intra-group dynamics—and because as a fundamentally normative theory, *intersectionality aims to transform the current system of oppression, exploitation, privilege, and power*—the intersectional tradition has been a leader in rejecting the idea that identity, on the individual and collective levels could ever be essentialist. While single-axis organizing or theorizing is not by definition essentialist,

the affinity between these approaches is clear; when a single axis is elevated above others in struggle, this often requires separating it from the other structures of power that the intersectional tradition exposes as enmeshed. In many of the social movements of the 20th century, this often meant (at least tactically) relying on a homogeneous notion of single-axis struggle, eliminating or at least downplaying the vibrant multiplicity of relations to systems of power that inhere inside any group defined solely through race or gender or class or sexuality alone. In this sense, we can think of one of the key hallmarks of the intersectional tradition to be a mobilization against identity (as self-sameness) for the sake of identity in a much more complicated, expanded sense.

For this reason, “identity” for oppressed people often requires what José Esteban Muñoz has called “disidentification”:

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.¹⁹

For Muñoz and for many intersectional theorists, navigating the complicated waters of identity requires fundamentally pushing back against dominant notions of identity. Even though this rejection or refusal often does involve the creation of new, different, resistant identities, by naming this process “disidentification,” Muñoz highlights the fundamental dissymmetry between the identity-work of empowered oppressed communities and hegemonic forms of imposed identification. It is for this reason that Muñoz’s “dis-” foregrounds the disjunction of identity politics rather than its continuity with “identity” normatively construed.

While I have focused up to this point on identity politics in oppressed communities, it is worth charting what intersectionality can offer as a framework for identity politics in relation to power and privilege. Commenting on how critics of intersectionality often conflate it with a “double (or multiple) jeopardy”²⁰ approach from which it is quite distinct,²¹ Devon Carbado reminds us that “Intersectionality applies even where there is no double jeopardy. Indeed, the theory applies where there is no jeopardy at all.”²² In order to make good on one of the most important insights of intersectionality’s structural analysis—that categories of identity are enmeshed in one another on an ontological as well as an experiential level—we must also hold that whiteness, for example, is constructed in and through gender, sexuality, ability, and coloniality as well. This is to say that straight, white men have no less “intersectional” identities than anyone else. However, intersectionality necessarily prescribes a different form of identity politics for those who benefit from intersectional domination rather than experience violence. The identity politics of the powerful consists of a few important aspects. In addition to the struggle for the recognition of one’s identity as explored in the previous section, an intersectional identity politics of privilege requires working *against* the content of one’s own identity. This means that intersectionality demands that white people work *against* whiteness as an outcome of white supremacy and demands cis people to work against binary gendering as an outcome of cissexism. It is important to remember in this discussion that the intersectional tradition recognizes the complexity of all of our identifications, and thus this perspective demands that even when, especially when, we experience oppression in some aspects of our lives, this does not relieve us

of our obligation to struggle against the forms of identity that bring us power and privilege in this society.

Exactly *how* one should do with this is open to debate within intersectional movements. But one promising framework coming out of Indigenous politics is the idea of becoming an “accomplice” in the struggle for global emancipation.²³ Accompliceship is a complicated negotiation of identity. It requires both a recognition and a claiming of one’s identity (against normative disavowal), but also the continual and material attempt at dismantling the conditions of one’s identity. In this sense, white accompliceship, for example, can be thought of as a claim to identity in order to lean into the responsibility and accountability of undoing structural whiteness. It is thus identity politics in a complicated sense: a simultaneous claiming and subversion, a *disidentification* in a very different sense to the way Muñoz used the term. I like to think about this as an *abidentification*. Using the prefix “ab” signifies coming “out of” something. When negotiating one’s privilege in a world so thoroughly constructed through domination, one has to simultaneously claim one’s problematic inheritance and use it as a spur to transform oneself and the world. This means one must be rooted in those aspects of identity in order to achieve a world beyond it. We cannot reject these identities or pretend that critical consciousness (or even sustained activism) erases the privilege carried; we must rather recognize our rootedness even as we militate against it.

In this way, intersectionality also demands a complicated positioning against certain forms of identity not only in ways we experience oppression and disempowerment but also where and when we experience power and privilege.

15.3 Conclusion: the struggle beyond identity

This piece so far has argued that the intersectional tradition offers us a supple and complicated understanding of identity, one that demands careful attention and continual negotiation. Far from the caricatured projections of intersectionality’s identity politics, we have seen that the intersectional tradition demands both struggling for and against identity in order to achieve a more just and liberated world. This push and pull of intersectionality’s identity politics are what makes it complicated to understand and difficult to practice; they are also why it, in part, is so often misunderstood, even by those who are sympathetic to it. But it is also what, in my opinion, makes intersectionality the most useful and compelling theory of identity we have available to us in the multifaceted, urgent necessity to change the world and with it, ourselves.

By way of concluding, I want to mention the ways that in a certain sense, the identity politics of the intersectional tradition also point us beyond identity. bell hooks once wrote that “to challenge identity politics we must offer strategies of politicization that enlarge our conception of who we are, that intensify our sense of intersubjectivity, our relation to a collective reality,” and “examine the self from a new, critical standpoint.”²⁴ One of the most important aspects of the intersectional conversation around identity is also acknowledging its limitations as a category and as a heuristic. Recognizing that a concept is necessary, useful, and powerful is not at all at odds with recognizing that it cannot do everything we need. hooks in particular emphasizes how in addition to identity—both individual and collective—the intersectional tradition highlights the need for true intersubjectivity and community, neither of which can be bounded by identity necessarily.

While the focus of this intervention here is about identity and identification, I would be remiss if I did not mention the fact that the intersectional tradition encompasses so much more than this particular node of investigation and that in this way, it also points us beyond identity. The work of liberation involves much more than a complex relationship to identity; it also

involves questions of organizational form, consciousness raising, community building, coalition forging, healing trauma, collective redistribution, and global reparation. These questions are not themselves solved by recourse to identity politics *alone*, though they also cannot be solved or decided without it.

Exactly what the world of liberation would look like is an open question—as is how identity as such would be constructed. The intersectional tradition points us to a world where, at a minimum, identity functions quite differently than it does in our own society, and in this sense can be thought of as a struggle beyond identity, at least as presently constituted.

Notes

- 1 I don't want to give much credence to this position for several reasons, not the least of which is that much of the time, the right denunciation of identity politics on this account tends to be disingenuous. Their true concern, after all, isn't an antiracist worry about reducing oppressed people to their oppression, but rather mobilizes a legible discourse of liberal individualism as a cynical cover for the continuation of that oppression. In both policy and rhetoric, they continue to support a structural white identity politics, a structural heteropatriarchal identity politics, a structural ableist, nativist, colonial identity politics. They often do not conceptualize their politics this way, but one of the key insights of intersectional thinking is the exposure of the status quo as a form of repressive identity politics in which a particular intersection of identities sets the terms for the creation and reproduction of the matrix of domination.
- 2 Again, I think we can identify this as a tendency without necessarily assuming good faith. There are certainly at least some in the liberal non-profit sphere who view these kinds of policies and procedures as concessions to be given, rather than as just conditions to be won.
- 3 As I explain in my book, *Marxism and Intersectionality*, I prefer to think of intersectionality as a "tradition" in order to highlight and foreground the vibrant heterogeneity of activists and academics who use this term. Rather than reproducing the idea that "intersectionality" means only one thing, universally agreed upon by all who take up its mantle, the language of "the intersectional tradition" allows us to see both a provisional unity and a community of thinkers who are bound together by certain affinities, but who also hold deep and important divergences and disagreements. See: Ashley J. Bohrer, *Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Class Gender, and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism* (Berlin: Transcript Verlag, 2019).
- 4 Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 8.
- 5 Michel Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations," in *Essential Works of Foucault, Volume I*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1998).
- 6 As Patricia Hill Collins commented in the revised edition of *Black Feminist Thought*, some scholars have wrongly argued that her work in particular (or intersectionality more generally) is little more than a revision or update to post-structuralism in general and Foucauldianism in particular. I argue against the conflation of intersectionality and European post-structuralism extensively in my book (see also: Ange-Marie Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History*, 1st edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), chap. 1). I do not want my invocation of Foucault's method here to be taken to mean that intersectionality is in some way inherently Foucauldian or post-structuralist; rather, I pull on Foucault's terminology here because I find it to be a useful elucidation of what is *new and distinctive* about intersectionality: that it takes identity as a space of problematization in its own right.
- 7 It is only by completely missing this central point that someone like Asad Haider can decry the supposed contradiction of identity politics: "Often we hear that the importance of identity politics is that it recognizes differences, a confusing claim if there ever was one, since identity and difference mean precisely opposite things." Asad Haider, "Identity: Words and Sequences," *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History* 10, no. 2 (October 2020): 246. This is only a witty gotcha if the goal of theorizing is unlocking simple axioms (for thought or action) rather than exposing the complicated, messy contradictions of praxis that grounded liberation work must continually grapple with.
- 8 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1242.
- 9 Vivian May, *Pursuing Intersectionality, Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 12.

- 10 Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color”; Anna Carastathis, *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).
- 11 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 78.
- 12 Patricia Hill Collins, “Comment on Hekman’s ‘Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited’: Where’s the Power?” *Signs* 22, no. 2 (1997): 375.
- 13 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2008), 291.
- 14 Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 43.
- 15 Linda Martín Alcoff, “Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 39–58; Charles W. Mills, “White Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 39–58.
- 16 Audre Lorde, *Sister/Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1984), 120–1.
- 17 Himani Bannerji, *Thinking Through: Essays on Feminism, Marxism, and Anti-Racism* (Canada: Women’s Press, 1995), 29.
- 18 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.
- 19 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.
- 20 Frances Beal, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female (1970),” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8, no. 2 (2008): 166–76; Deborah K. King, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology,” *Signs* 14, no. 1 (1988): 42–72.
- 21 For a sustained examination of the difference between these approaches, see: Ange-Marie Hancock, “When Multiplication Doesn’t Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality as a Research Paradigm,” *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 1 (2007): 63–79.
- 22 Devon Carbado, “Colorblind Intersectionality,” *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 814.
- 23 Indigenous Action Media, “Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex,” 2014, <https://indigenouaction.org/wp-content/uploads/accomplices-not-allies-print-friendly.pdf>.
- 24 bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), 107.

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16

NETWORKS OF RELATIONALITIES THROUGH THE LENS OF MATERIAL CULTURE

Minoo Moallem

16.1 Networks of relationality through the lens of material culture

The concepts of intersectionality, assemblage, articulation, and connectivities with their specific genealogies and histories have been used to map out a complex world of power relations characterized by differences, interconnections, entanglements, and enfoldments. While each concept has its theoretical genealogy and history and needs to be discussed in the context of the debates and exchanges, they all push for a complex understanding of differences.

The concept of intersectionality has purchased value as a mainstream methodological rubric across geopolitical and biopolitical contexts, sometimes undermining what was diagnosed as racial difference in the context of the US.¹ What is less explored within the literature is how modern subjectivities are constituted by their relationship to the inanimate and non-human. Indeed, it is impossible to separate the operation of both the nation and empire since colonial modernity from the material world of objects and commodities. Since the rise of consumer capitalism, commodities have been central to relations of power. Various studies, especially within the field of gender and sexuality, have certainly brought into focus the crossing of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and other forms of difference.² Most theorizations of intersectionality and intersectional production of knowledge are invested in the enlightenment notion of the human subject as separate from ecology and the inanimate world of objects and things. Furthermore, the intersection of technology and bodies (as illustrated in feminist scholar Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg as an information construct) has been crucial for an understanding of relationalities that challenge the notion of human bodies and subjectivities as separate from ecological and technological changes (Haraway 1991). Echoing more recent scholarship on the nexus of human/animal/machine, Jasbir Puar's re-reading of intersectionality as assemblage offers a critique of privileging bodies as human or animal and instead refers to multiple forms of matter.³ Also, several feminist scholars have elaborated on the problems of anthropocentrism.⁴

In this chapter, I argue that the literature on intersectionality has been crucial in challenging what Chela Sandoval has called the oppositional consciousness (Sandoval 1991)⁵ that turns women into a homogeneous category. However, the networks of relationality between the human and non-human worlds constitutive of both nation and empire are less discussed in feminist studies. In this chapter, I aim to focus on biopolitical and geopolitical networks of relationalities, to reflect upon the predicament of the nation and empire in sustaining colonial

modernity's notions of difference through the inanimate and non-human in a postcolonial era. I ask what happens when we go beyond the boundary of the human and the inanimate to understand the complex and dynamic web of relations and multiple axes of power and knowledge that are sustained through material culture in motion transnationally. In other words, as noted by Michael Taussing (1993, 237),⁶ what happens when the emphasis is on the representation over the represented? I am less concerned here about the turn to materiality or new materialism than about connectivities and motion.⁷ It would also be impossible to address the relationship between the human and ecology in this short article.

As Minna Salami has brilliantly argued, the Euro-patriarchal regimes of knowledge production have suppressed an understanding of knowledge as an ecosystem based on the relationship between nature and people.⁸ Hence, this essay will focus only on objects and commodities and their entanglement with various forms of institutions, cultures, and identities. More specifically, I examine questions of visibility and power, along with the way objects have become a site of affective imperialism and nationalism, to argue that it is crucial to interrogate questions of subjectivity as being part of the inanimate world of objects, commodities, and things considered sacred, ethnographic, or commercial.

16.2 Power and visibility

Objects, like humans, are in transnational circulation, shaping who we are, how we relate to others, and how we live our everyday lives. They are part of our world's cultural, political, economic, and ecologic systems. They also shape individual and collective identities at the local, regional, national, and imperial orders and borders. Objects are central to the construction of the human being as separate from its environment. Colonial modernity has extensively relied on the presence or absence of objects and commodities to define the binary states of civilization and savagery. In other words, objects are crucial to a signification system based on the separation of objects from subjects. As a matter of fact, not only those referred to as "exotic" people or cultures are mediated by the objects to define, materialize, and legitimize Western superiority, but also exotic objects called fetishes and idols have served to define the superiority of Western civilizations.

The concatenation of humans with transnational commodities in colonial trade naturalized commerce involving slavery and the slave trade. As noted by Madeleine Doby, "woven cotton was one of the most common basic units of exchange, and the value of slaves and the goods exchanged to purchase them was often measured in terms of pieces of cloth" (2010, 103)⁹ so equivalencing the value of human beings and transnational commodities. Also, the juxtaposition of the land and women's bodies in imperial mapping and the collapse of female colonized bodies with the landscape have been crucial in the modernization of patriarchy (McClintock 1995).¹⁰

Furthermore, as the literature on art and ethnographic objects and commodities demonstrate, exotic objects were depicted as primitive crafts (commodified or collected) and put in the hands of the museums to protect and preserve them.¹¹ As I have argued elsewhere, Western connoisseurs mediated the aesthetic and market value of these objects, putting some into circulation as commodities and marginalizing others in the political economy context (Moallem 2018). As noted by Sally Price, the cultural geography of a distinction between the definition of a "here" (homes, galleries, museums, and studios in Europe and North America) and a "there" (remote settlements and exotic cultures) or what she calls "traffic in culture," needs liberation from its Eurocentric context (1989, 130–1). National museums have invested in the notion of home and heritage through objects. Objects, from how they emerge as "valuable" to their exchange, circulation, and display as representing other cultures, are linked with power relations and how power invests in objects to construct the hierarchy of subjects versus things, civilized versus

primitive. As noted by Stuart Hall, moving from objects to the practices of display, the poetics and politics of exhibition, or the question of power and knowledge shows the link between power and visibility.¹² Museum spaces create the hierarchy of humans and objects while disciplining how subjects and objects interact with each other. In this context, museums are disciplined spaces where subjects are always located at a distance from the objects, consistently superior to the things, and always gazing at them. One could argue that the gaze of the objects on display also constructs the viewers by putting them within the linear time of modernity. In other words, objects produce power by visualizing and displaying differences, materializing them, and making them tangible in a museum, an art gallery, or window shopping online.

16.3 Interrogating animism, totemism, and fetishism

Since colonial modernity, the three concepts of animism, totemism, and fetishism have been used to depict and construct the boundaries of objects and subjects, self and other, human and non-human, the civilized and the primitive, and the internal and the external. These concepts include a variety of material objects—from fire and water to trees and sacred objects—historically closed to the exchange economy of rising capitalism in the past and neoliberal economy in the present. Of course, some philosophers such as Gaston Bachelard have elaborated on the image of fire as a “complex” in Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis, as a forbidden source of knowledge, and the will to intellectuality ([1938] 1964).¹³ In other words, Bachelard pays attention to the constellations of ideas and emotions at the same time, challenging Freud in his distinction between the internal and the external: “[W]e learn how to distinguish between the internal, which belongs to the ego, and the external, which comes from the world outside, through deliberate control of our sensory activity and appropriate muscular action” (Freud 2002, 6).¹⁴

Not only do the hierarchies of human and non-human rely on the dichotomy of subjects and objects, but the fetishism of people referred to in colonial and racist literature as “negros of Africa” or “Orientals” is invested with power relations crossing the boundaries of objects and subjects. As brilliantly demonstrated by James Clifford, with the rise of Western possessive individualism in the 17th century also emerged a sense of self as owner. As he notes, “The ideal individual surrounds itself with accumulated properties and goods” (1985, 237).¹⁵ Clifford argues “Thus the self which must possess, but cannot have it all, learns to select, order, classify in hierarchies—to make “good” collections” (238). According to Clifford, the relationship with objects that are rule-governed possessions presupposes a “savage” or deviant relation-idolatry or erotic fixation (239). So, it would be hard to talk about the concepts of class, race, gender, or intersectionality of power without engaging with what is constructed as the world of the inanimate or what could be possessed as marks of class distinction, as explained by Bourdieu,¹⁶ racial, ethnic, and cultural superiority, and gender difference. As argued by Jain Kajri vernacularizing capitalism incorporates local cultural constituencies with existing economic, political, and social formations. She suggests that

images and the culture industry have played a crucial role in such process everywhere and continue to do through a set of fine-gained articulations between “formal,” and “informal” modes of industrial and commercial organization: between commercial, religious, political and social institutions; between disparate technologies and context of image making and consumption; and between centralized and decentralized inscriptions of national and local identity.

(2007, 37–8)¹⁷

Thus, any account of subjectivity in colonial modernity would be incomplete if one does not take into consideration subject-object relationality and internal and external stimulus as a continuum rather than as isolated and separated from each other. Indeed, the individual functioning in a modern world, as well illustrated by scholars who have written on “attention” and “perception,” challenges a distinct separation of subject/object relation and a stable notion of consciousness that have opened modern forms of control, management, and mass manipulation, especially with the rise of information technologies or what Deleuze has called a “network of permanent observation” (Crary 2001, 76; Deleuze 1990).¹⁸

16.4 Empire, nation, and the matrix of knowledge and power

The radical separation between what we refer to as humans and the material and social world is a byproduct of colonial modernity. The construction of otherness in a colonial context was enabled by the collection of objects. Indeed, the collection of objects from Indigenous cultures, or cultures from the global south, and their display at museums and world fairs in the global north has been part and parcel of empire building. As I have argued elsewhere, it has also been a significant part of nation-state formation and national identification; without material objects on display, it would have been hard to provide evidence of cultural superiority or cultural and national belonging.

In this context, as demonstrated by Bruno Latour,

What is called “knowledge” cannot be defined without understanding what *gaining* knowledge means. In other words, “knowledge” is not something that could be described by itself or by opposition to “ignorance” or to “belief,” but only by considering a whole cycle of accumulation: how to bring things back to a place for someone to see it for the first time so that others might be sent again to bring other things back. In other words, how to be familiar with things, people and events, which are distant.

(1987, 220)¹⁹

For Latour, an assemblage of actor-networks and subject-objects as mutually constitutive of each other has been crucial in knowledge production in colonial modernity. To bring home events, places, and people, according to Latour, enabled domination at a distance by rendering the objects mobile and by keeping the objects stable and combinable, from the shapes of land made mobile by cartographers, to rocks, birds, artifacts, or anything that can be made to move (1987, 223–5).

Social sciences, sociology, and anthropology center their research on the priority of subjects and the gaze of subjects on objects, devaluing a concept of the subject-object matrix as significant, not in a unidirectional way, but in its full hybridity and intermingling. By positioning the human against (or separated from) society, social sciences have created space for objects to be studied only under the gaze of the subject.

The fear of impurity in the convergence of objects and subjects as mutually constitutive of each other has impacted the conceptual framework of various theoretical traditions in modernity. Freud called the erotic desire for objects perverse while covering his therapy couch with Persian carpets—an exotic commodity in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.²⁰ Sacred objects from other cultures, including African or Indigenous communities, have been constructed as signifiers of fetishism and primitivism. The concept of fetishism in colonial modernity has been used to depict and separate primitive peoples and designate their so-called cult objects—either animals, elements from nature, or inanimate things—as part of their primitive

and savage minds.²¹ As I have demonstrated in my book on Persian carpets, the Orientalization of certain objects, or “Orientalia,” has been part and parcel of Orientalism (Moallem 2018).

It would be hard to talk about the nation and the empire without engaging with the economic and cultural aspects of the accumulation of material commodities. Indeed, class, racial, and gender distinctions are made and remade through material objects as much as through discourses and ideologies. As argued by Santiago Castro-Gómez, “The ‘gold of the Indies’ made the great flow of riches from America to the European Mediterranean possible, a situation that generated the conditions for the ‘humanistic revolution’ of the sixteenth century to flourish” (2007).²² The circulation of objects was crucial to the flourishing of the humanistic revolution. As noted by Castro-Gómez, an “epistemological hegemony” constructs European modernity and its methods of knowledge production over all other cultures (2007, 433). So, it is crucial to interrogate humanism, or the emergence of the concept of “human,” in relation to objects and commodities as an integral part of the coloniality of knowledge.

As noted by Maria Lugones, the dichotomous hierarchy between the human and the non-human is central to colonial modernity. She writes

“Beginning with the colonization of Americas and the Caribbean, a hierarchical dichotomous distinction between human and non-human was imposed on the colonized in the service of Western man. It was accompanied by other dichotomous hierarchical distinctions, among them that between men and women. This distinction became a mark of the human and a mark of civilization. Only the civilized are men and women. Indigenous peoples of Americas and enslaved Africans were classified as not human in species-as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild.”

(2010, 743)²³

Along with Lugones, many scholars have criticized the dehumanization, objectification, and animalization of colonized people as a component of colonial modernity and its exploitative economic systems and its rationalizing narrative in a postcolonial or neocolonial era.²⁴ Certainly, it would be crucial to interrogate humanist culture in its intersection with material culture as removed from their historical, colonial, and imperial contexts. Thus, the objects sacred or profane, part of everyday life or exhibited in museums, including technological devices, converge with who we are, how we identify, what our class and ethnic background are, and our affective relationship with the culture of empire or specific national cultures. As noted by Elizabeth Williams, as early as the 17th century, pre-Columbian artifacts were collected and categorized as the work of savages (1985, 148).²⁵

The civilized world distinguishes itself from those invested in the worship of objects. Fetishes or idols stand for anything from fire and water to inanimate objects. The linear and developmental logic of the movement from the age of childhood to the age of civilization and the myth of progress dividing the civilized world from the barbaric has been crucial in the rise of the human as the supreme being. The separation of reason from affects and emotions from intellect has facilitated such distinctions. Indeed, fetishes, or objects invested with power, were considered as belonging to the age of savagery and primitiveness. According to Charles de Brosses, both Africans and some ancient nations of the Orient worship many Gods, sacred objects, and talismans in a respectful manner, by addressing their wishes to them, offering them sacrifices, and carrying them in procession if it is possible, or wear them on their persons with great marks of veneration, and consult them on any significant occasion (2017 [1750], 48–9).²⁶ What Europeans call “fetishes” refers to the otherness of the other through what they depict as an intermingling of objects and subjects, or a hybrid relationship between subjects and objects that is not rational

or based on the superiority of humans. For example, de Brosses refers to how the Iroquois envision spirits of all sorts in all natural things, and in anything new or unknown to them (2017 [1750], 57). For de Brosses, Egyptians, along with those he refers to as Negroes and Americans (Native Americans) worship animals and plants and “the great variety of objects worshipped by savage peoples” (2017 [1750], 66, 78). For him, the reason for such fetishism should be sought in what he calls “the constant conformity of savage man to his own nature” (2017 [1750], 101).

An interrogation of networks of relationalities, both biopolitical and geopolitical, demonstrates the entanglements of nation and empire in sustaining colonial difference through objects. It is crucial for feminist scholars with an analytical investment in understanding intersectionality to interrogate the complex and dynamic web of relations and multiple axes of power and privilege sustained through material culture in motion transnationally.

Notes

- 1 Several scholars and activists developed the concept of intersectionality, including the Combahee River Collective (<https://combaheerivercollective.weebly.com/>) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” 1989). Some feminist scholars, including Malini Johar Schueller (“Analogy and [White] Feminist Theory: Thinking Race and the Color of the Cyborg Body,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30[1]: 63–92, 2005) and Puar (“‘I Would Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Goddess’: Becoming–Intersectional in Assemblage Theory,” *philoSOPHIA* 2[1]: 49–66, January 2012), has noted that the attempt to mainstream intersectionality may have more to do with the recentring of white liberal feminism than a critique of legal, political, and representational discriminatory practices as intended by Crenshaw or articulated by Audre Lorde, Barbara Christian, and others. Jennifer Nash in “Re-thinking Intersectionality,” *Feminist Review* 89[1]: 1–15, 2008, offers a more complex perspective on intersectionality by identifying some tensions: the scholarship’s vague definition of intersectionality, the reification of cumulative notions of identity, less attention to an analysis of sexuality, nationality, and class, the reference to Black women as unitary and homogeneous subjects, and the gap between intersectional methodology and practices of empirical investigations and the application of race and gender as transhistorical categories.
- 2 I leave some of the critiques of intersectionality and its limits and displacement—from the significance of race to a taken-for-granted concept used to reinvest in foundational notions of gender—if the concept performs the analytical work instead of a careful analysis of difference leading to the significance of the concept.
- 3 Jasbir Puar, “I Would Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Goddess,” 5.
- 4 See among others, R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, UK, 2013, 12; *New Materialisms: Interviews and Cartographies*, edited by R. Dolphijn and I. van der Tuin. London, 2012; G. Gaard, “Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism,” *Feminist Formations* 2: 26–53, 2011. Also, Kimberly Analouise Keating and Kimberly C. Merenda’s “Decentering the Human? Towards a Post-Anthropocentric Standpoint Theory” offers a reading of Gloria Anzaldúa’s bridge, as well as “Neplanteras,” as crossing the human–nonhuman border while preserving the notion of human as complex and non-unitary (79–80); and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010. Karen Barad, *Vibrant Matter*.
- 5 Chela Sandoval, “U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World,” *Genders* 10, Spring 1991.
- 6 Michael Taussing, “Maleficium: State Fetishism,” in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, co-edited by Emily Apter and William Pietz. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993, 217–47.
- 7 For more information on new materialism see Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialism: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- 8 Mina Salami, *Sensuous Knowledge: A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone*. New York: Amistad/HarperCollins Publisher, 2020.
- 9 Madeleine Dobie, *Trading Places: Colonization and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century French Culture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010.

- 10 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
- 11 See among others Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- 12 Stuart Hall defines the poetic of exhibition as the practices of meaning production within the internal categorization and ordering of an exhibition. He defines the politics of exhibition so as to examine the production of social knowledge and the question of institutional power (Stuart Hall (ed.) *Representation, London: The Open University, 1997*, 168–185).
- 13 Gaston Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, translated by Alan C. M. Ross. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964.
- 14 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. London and New York: Penguin Classic, 2002.
- 15 James Clifford, “Objects and Selves—An Afterward,” in *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, edited by George W. Stocking, Jr. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, 237.
- 16 While Bourdieu continues to rely on a sociological approach that separated social actors from objects of consumption, his concept of class habitus grasps the interaction between what is learned through cultural knowledge and consumptive practices. For more information see: *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Les edition de Minuit, 1979.
- 17 Jain Kajri, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economics of Indian Calendar Art*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- 18 See Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*. Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2001; and Gilles Deleuze, “Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle,” in *L'autre Journal* 1, Mai 1990. Also see Virilio, Paul, *The Vision Machine*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994; Guy Deord, Foucault, 1975 *Discipline and Punish*.
- 19 Bruno Latour, *Science in Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- 20 For more information see, Marina Warner, “Freud’s Couch: A Case History,” in *Raritan: A Quarterly Review*, 31(2): 146–63, 2011.
- 21 For an analysis of fetishism see Alfonso Maurizio Iacono, *The History and Theory of Fetishism*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- 22 Santiago Castro-Gómez, “The Missing Chapter of Empire,” *Cultural Studies*, 21(2–3), 428–48.
- 23 Maria Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” *Hypatia*, 25(4): 742–59, fall 2010.
- 24 Among others, see *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, edited by Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson. London and New York: Blackwell Publishers, 1996; Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- 25 Elizabeth Williams, “Art and Artifact at the Trocadero,” in *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, edited by George W. Stocking. Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press, 1985, 146–66.
- 26 Charles de Brosses, “On Worship of Fetish Gods: Or, A Parallel of the Ancient Religion of Egypt with the Present Religion of Nigritia,” in *The Return of Fetishism*, edited by Rosalind C. Morris and Daniel H. Leonard. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017, 44–132.

PART III

Intersectionality's travels



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REVISITING A POLITICS OF LOCATION WITH AND WITHOUT INTERSECTIONALITY

Mary E. John

The current oversaturated atmosphere within which intersectionality is thriving might benefit from a politics of location. Adrienne Rich coined the phrase more than a generation ago in order to decenter herself in relation to certain visions and practices of global sisterhood and cosmopolitan citizenship. Rereading her “Notes towards a Politics of Location” (Rich 1984) continues to be rewarding. Location—not identity—was her chosen term to situate her life within historical time and geopolitical space, as a woman whose whiteness signified prior to being embodied female. Her notes articulated a process of ongoing (re)location in the US postwar decades in order to acknowledge the kinds of ignorance that inevitably accompany relative privilege, but which did not, for all that, prevent her re-education toward a more “politicised life” (Rich 1984, 234). Other iterations have followed—ranging from Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?” (Martin and Mohanty 1986) to Ritty Lukose’s “Decolonizing Feminism in the #MeToo Era” (Lukose 2018).

As I put it all these years ago,

locations play a constitutive role in structuring the frames of reference within which we develop our projects ... This includes our institutional and disciplinary affiliations, the milieu of intellectual debate, ... the grain of everyday life, not all of which can be rendered explicit ... [Location] becomes the site of one’s questions and interventions, the place of accountability.

(John 1996a, 110)

Unlike Rich, whose European audience could be confined to a footnote, my reflections were more constitutively structured by movement—away from and toward home. Discrepant dislocations as a postcolonial subject became the grounds for rethinking the very meaning and purpose of travel—articulated at that time in relation to my years in the US as a graduate student, and my desire to see how “questions of race and the demands of US women of color, could be illuminating analogies that would travel well, if handled with care, into our contemporary situation” in India (John 1996a, 144).

Being located as I am today within the institutionalized spaces of women’s studies in contemporary India gives me one kind of vantage point from which to say something about inter-

sectionality, in the mode of writing back to American readers of this volume. The field and discipline of women's studies in India is at once embattled and contested—under unmitigated attack from right-wing political and economic agendas, while also contending with a heterogeneous student politics marked by gender, caste, language, regional, and other overlapping and crisscrossing hierarchies. In a time, moreover, of accelerated global traffic in ideas and texts, neither teachers nor students could remain unaffected by intersectionality's claims to a unique intellectual and superior feminist politics. As I will be demonstrating, the concept has already acquired a talisman-like aura in our circles. This can turn into a moment of danger, leading me to suggest that a relook at non-intersectional modes of thought could be a corrective. I will be offering two examples of such interventions—within the trajectories of Marxism and in the statistical analysis of multiple variables. The first could be called non-intersectional while the second is even anti-intersectional in its aims. None of this takes away from the necessity of an intersectional feminism, whether in India or elsewhere. But unless we cultivate discrepant and contradictory modes of analysis, our chances of making advances in our collective struggles are likely to remain more ritualistic than substantive.

Let me begin with my first encounter with feminism and race. I was a graduate student in the US from 1985 to 1991. Myriad desires and forces have drawn Indian (“third world”) students to American (“first world”) universities. It was there that I encountered feminism in a way that hadn't happened in India. To discover feminism in the late 1980s in the US was to be buffeted by difference—the difference of women and the difference in women, as one of our teachers, Teresa de Lauretis, phrased it. Sexuality (later indexed in relation to the sex wars) was one manifestation of this “difference,” and another was race (subsequently often rendered as “identity politics”). Being interpellated as a “woman of color” in such a context was a profoundly unsettling experience for someone reorienting herself to the perspectives of postcoloniality. We read myriad texts old and new on US feminism, women, and race—Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class* (1983), Hortense Spillers' “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe” (1987), Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983), Aida Hurtado's “Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Lives of White Women and Women of Color” (1989), and of course *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (1982), to name a few I recall from that time. Though my graduate program prized itself on getting hold of the very latest writings, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's two major texts introducing intersectionality were published in 1989 and 1991 (Crenshaw 1989, 1991), these were not on our horizon. What might it mean, I speculated as those graduate years drew to a close, to teach texts such as these back in India, given the whitening process that has accompanied the travels of histories of US slavery and racism to other shores (John 1989, 1996a)? As it turned out, this desire only became a reality more than a decade later, when I got my first chance to be part of a women and gender studies teaching program in an Indian university, and, by then, the buzz attached to intersectionality had fully arrived.

It is impossible, from my present location, to take stock of the massive volume of writing on intersectionality that seems to have exploded in the US in more recent years. What may once have been a buzz has become rather deafening. I tell myself that it should not be necessary to make sense of it all in order to have something to say. (This is part of a third-world mentality that I have not quite shaken off—we think that unless we have digested everything that has been written on a subject, especially if it has emanated from the first world, we have no right to speak.)

A few years ago I responded to an article by Nivedita Menon on intersectionality (Menon 2015; John 2015; see also Gopal 2015). It was an occasion for offering some initial thoughts on

what it was about intersectionality that attracted me and why it was an advance over much used and abused references to “multiple identities.” In my interpretation, intersectionality indexed the failure of additive theories of multiplicity. I suggested further that we should not be too quick to assume that feminists in India have overcome the limitations of our versions of “single axes” thinking. We too might benefit from a more intersectional feminism. In a just-published volume, *Women in the Worlds of Labour: Interdisciplinary and Intersectional Perspectives* (John and Gopal 2021c), Meena Gopal and I have, as the subtitle suggests, brought ideas of interdisciplinarity and intersectionality into the subject of labor where such concerns have been relatively scarce. The interdisciplinary aspect may be more obvious: the study of labor has been a matter of silos and exclusions, contained within certain mainstream disciplines like economics or history and left largely unaddressed elsewhere. And why intersectionality? On the one hand, we saw failures in accounting for simultaneous oppressions in contexts that resonated with the intersectional challenges raised by Black feminists. “Where, for instance, is the disabled woman in feminist analyses of labour, or in the disability movement?” (John and Gopal 2021c, xxxi). On the other hand, this was also an opportunity to broaden the scope of theorizing. There was a need to step back from the assumption that problems emerge only at the intersection of different axes of theorizing, in order to ask a prior question: could particular axes be missing altogether? To take an example, in disputes over labor and sexuality (as in the contentious issue of prostitution and sex work), where was caste in Indian debates? Thirdly, and as a direct corollary, we also considered the more prosaic sense of intersectionality in relation to the multiple vectors of analysis one finds in so much mainstream social science, especially involving quantitative data sets. These data sets are more commonly analyzed via economic criteria like poverty, income, and asset holding rather than say, through the lens of caste, sexuality, religion, and so on. Here the challenge would be to track the limits of making many more aspects of identity visible—whether as a marker of privilege or disadvantage—and then look at what the simultaneity of the effects of multiple structures would yield.

In sum, the advantages of intersectionality as a habit of thought are undisputed and can be pushed further. And yes, it is a notion that can fruitfully “travel” into the postcolonial world. But could one also have too much of a good thing? Intersectionality is not just a buzzword, but has transmuted into the solution to all our problems, or so it would appear. Spurred by the sheer overloading of the concept that I feel is emanating from the US (and to a lesser extent from European spaces) and by signs in India that intersectionality is turning into a talisman of our own, this chapter moves somewhat away from intersectionality. I discovered with some dismay that my own writing on the subject was being read as proof that intersectionality was the (only?) true path for Indian feminism. In their volume *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader*, the editors Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore choreographed a range of published writings in order to reorient Indian feminism through a critique of what they called dominant feminism, while proposing an alternative in the name of Dalit feminist theory (Arya and Rathore 2020, 1–2). This is not the place to give a detailed account of how they have set about their task. What gave me pause was the way in which they reconstructed the exchange of views alluded to earlier (Menon 2015; John 2015; Gopal 2015 in Arya and Rathore 2020, 5–8 and 171–3). My criticisms of Menon were somehow clear evidence that (a) the main problem with Indian feminism is its reluctance to engage with the concept of intersectionality; and (b) that intersectionality is universally applicable to the point of being the means to achieve gender justice.

Actually, my 2015 response was quite preliminary in scope and concluded with a worry and a hope:

If intersectionality is to have any genuinely liberatory potential it must be that it contributes to building solidarity across subjects that are recognised as otherwise

getting lost between movements and agendas. A major (if less noted) aspect of the success of US hegemony in the intellectual field is its heterogeneity, its capacity to house positions of opposition and to find space for immigrant differences. Voices that come from elsewhere are, therefore, too rarely of major consequence and the direction of traffic continues to be largely one way. This makes it conceivable that the trajectories of intersectionality could mark yet another instance of global unidirectionality, since even the struggles of black feminism are not immune to their geopolitical location in the world's only superpower. Above all else, then, there is a profound need for more critical dialogue across global feminist margins and centres. I, for one, think that intersectionality would make for an excellent candidate in such an endeavour.

(John 2015, 76)

In a mode that I hope will not be seen as perverse, and after trying to sift through a small proportion of the wealth of the literature “out there,” I would like to suggest that in order to make the dialogue a more substantive one, we need to think with *and* without intersectionality. Or to put it differently, whatever our partiality toward intersectionality as an idea and a political orientation might be, we must also look at instances where intersectionality is *not* being practiced but which has nonetheless been of value to our theorizing, and hence for our politics as well.

My first example comes from the historical practice of Marxist feminism and working-class movements. The Indian context—not unlike others I would imagine—has been characterized by often heated and protracted exchanges regarding the primacy of class as a category of analysis and for organizing. Marxist writings are quite noteworthy for a strong antipathy toward “identity politics,” which can then translate further into an active disinterest in if not hostility toward intersectionality as an idea.¹

The US literature on intersectionality attests that much of its power and appeal came from the long history of Black feminist engagements with gender and race. This was accompanied by a certain guarding of these “origins” in its initial development, as Jennifer Nash has so eloquently shown (Nash 2018). Considerably less attention was given to genealogies and trajectories of class. This is not to detract from the links made in the literature on the overrepresentation of Black women and women of color among the working class and poor, and in any event, much has moved from the earlier years, visible in the more recent writings of its most well-known proponents such as Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins (e.g., Hill Collins and Birge 2016).² There is also the work of British feminists like Nira Yuval-Davis, who writes from a location where gender, race, and class have been the operative structures for comparable versions of intersectionality, but which did not receive the kind of institutional acknowledgment that its US counterpart has come to enjoy (Yuval-Davis 2006).

My point is somewhat different. Unlike “Black women” or “women of color” whose intersectional location has been so critical in developing intersectionality as an idea, “working-class women” in what we might call the classic frameworks of Marxism are *not* intersectional subjects. Historically, going all the way back to the late 19th century, socialists (from Friedrich Engels to Clara Zetkin) identified working-class women as central to their politics. The “woman question” was all about whether socialism was sufficient in guaranteeing working class women their place alongside men or whether women’s struggles needed their own acknowledgment. Whatever else may have been the limitations in asserting the primacy of socialism, the problem was not one of the intersecting fortunes of two distinct bodies of thought, one pertaining to class and the other to gender. The (bourgeois) feminism of the propertied classes was never in contention in the first place, whose subjects were, in Rosa Luxemburg’s scathing tones, the “parasites of the parasites of the social order,” while socialist politics was to revolutionize the lives of “the slaves of

the slaves” (cited in MacKinnon 1981). Thus working-class women were already housed within socialism and in no danger of being lost due to the failures of simultaneous oppressions. It was rather what kind of horizon socialism constituted and what aspects of women’s lives needed to be given a place in theory and for political organizing—a matter of considerable debate and where differences abounded within a shared communist world view.

I realize that this historical strand in the history of Marxist politics is less well represented in the US. It is more common to encounter Heidi Hartmann’s thesis of the “unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism” (Hartmann 1981) or Linda Gordon’s recent reflections on the largely forgotten if happier “intersectionality” of the US socialist feminisms of the 1960s and 1970s (Gordon 2016). Hartmann’s important essay is noteworthy for being unsympathetic to a Marxism that drew from within its own theoretical resources to theorize gender under capitalism. The most stunning example of such theorizing was the brief wages for housework campaign in Italy and Britain during the 1970s. Theirs was an explicitly Marxist argument—*not* a particularly feminist one—highlighting the role of the unpaid labors of the housewife in that even more hidden abode of (re)production, the home, but for whom capitalism would collapse (Dalla Costa and James 1975). The boss of the housewife was most definitely not the husband, but the capitalist for whom the husband expended his labor. Feminists harping on an engagement with the gender division of labor within the home through the sharing of housework were missing this aspect altogether. I would term it the high point of “single axis” thinking, one which has now gained new traction in current opposition to neoliberalism. Does such thinking have its own blindspots and limits? Undoubtedly, as I have discussed elsewhere (John 2014, 2021b). But this does not take away from their insights. Revamped theories of social reproduction have been making a re-entry worldwide, and the writings of someone like Silvia Federici are reaching new audiences (e.g., Federici 2012).³

Comparable legacies of left thinking have their imprint everywhere, including in India. The women’s movement in the Indian post-independence context that burst into public view in the 1970s during years of widespread political upheaval was largely seen to be left-oriented. This had major repercussions for the identification of the preferred subjects of their political organizing and in the burgeoning field of women’s studies in working-class and rural contexts. As a consequence, we cannot rest with the idea of a putative homogeneous “woman” that was the subject of an earlier feminist politics, which has now made some room for “differences,” though unfortunately, this has become something of an unexamined assumption. Heterogeneous locations—from the rural peasantry to the urban working and middle classes figured as the sites for organizing and theorizing women’s oppressions in their formative phase during the 1970s and 1980s. Women suffering the many deprivations and violence of development became the preferred subjects needing rescue from their invisibility as citizens before a state that was failing them. Feminists were particularly focused on the many labors undertaken by rural women that found no place in the public acknowledgment of work. This is a complex issue that calls for further reflection. My limited purpose in bringing it up here is to point to a legacy of simultaneous oppressions with a decidedly different political dynamic than that of intersectionality.

Much more analytical and historical work remains to be done in order to situate these subjects of the Indian women’s movement and its feminisms with the necessary care. We are therefore not well positioned to track all that has been said about decisive shifts in feminist politics from the 1990s (Tharu and Niranjana 1994; John 1996b). It is by the 1990s that the women’s movement can be said to have found recognition and a place in public life. “Suddenly, ‘women’ are everywhere,” pronounced Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana (1994, 232). New economic regimes of globalization and liberalization; the rise of Hindu right-wing politics and of Hindutva-identified women; and a new consciousness of caste as a contemporary structure of

inequality and identity set in motion processes with repercussions for how “women” were now being identified and differences and exclusions articulated. When I look at some of the writing of this period (Rege 1998, 2006; Manorama 1992) a different kind of formulation is discernable, one that no longer rests with the invocation of “invisibility.” “All the women are savarna; all the men are Dalit,” writes Sharmila Rege, directly mimicking the title of the *Black Women’s Studies* reader *But Some of Us Are Brave*. As she put it,

The early 1990s saw the assertion of autonomous Dalit women’s organisations at both regional and national levels. Such an assertion had thrown up several crucial theoretical and political challenges, besides underlining the brahmanism of the feminist movement and the patriarchal practices of Dalit politics.

(Rege 1998, WS-39)

In these kinds of formulations, the double exclusion of Dalit women by a feminism now renamed as Brahmanical/upper caste/Savarna, on the one hand, and by a masculine Dalit movement, on the other, sounds identical to those familiar with the problem of intersectionality. Interestingly, a writer like Sharmila Rege called for a Dalit feminist standpoint as the way forward. Rege’s appeal to non-Dalit women to assume the standpoint of Dalit feminism is unlike the common invocation of solidarity building. It draws from a Phule Ambedkarite tradition of the politics of a non-Brahmin education and possibly also from Marxist ideas of “declassing.”⁴

I believe that we have yet to fully address the complexities of intersectional and non-intersectional subjectivities when we examine the resources and limitations of “single-axis” theories. Marxism has been rightly held accountable for its reductive economism. But politically there remains a need to recognize the extent to which Marxism offered intellectual resources for an identifiably feminist political agenda, without departing from its founding frames, from the days of Clara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg, and Alexandra Kollontai, the movements for wages for housework led by Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, and Silvia Federici, to the identification of rural women’s struggles in the Indian women’s movement and in women’s studies classrooms of the 1970s and 1980s.

My second example could be seen as something of the obverse to the arguments made by Leslie McCall in her much-cited essay on the complexity of intersectionality (McCall 2005). McCall approached intersectionality in the context of a lack of clarity regarding the research methodologies most suited to the study of intersectionality. In her view an intersectional methodology was required in order to address “the complexity that arises when the subject of analysis expands to include multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis” (McCall 2005, 1772). She focused in particular on what she calls inter-categorical modes of analysis (her example being wage inequalities between men and women along the axes of race and educational attainment) and wondered why this kind of analysis had so little purchase in the field of women’s studies compared to say ethnography, history, or deconstruction. This may be an instance of a very US-centric judgment—in countries like India, the resources of the mainstream social sciences including the analysis of macro data have been the mainstay of much of the research on women. After all, third-world nations have long been constructed through large numbers, and these methodologies have continued to live on in a postpositive world.

What McCall’s analysis does not sufficiently highlight in my view is that analyses of large data sets (whether of the intra-categorical or inter-categorical type) invariably move in the opposite direction after recognizing the intersectional subject, in order to probe the range of factors that constitute and make her. Decompositional analyses break down data sets into their constituent elements—to be able to decide just how significant a particular vector or indicator might be.

We seem to have come right back to the very “single axes” that classic essays on intersectionality identified as the problem! In the face of the complexity of multiple indicators of identity, such theorizing presses further to ask which aspect of identity may be playing the most significant role as the “driver” of a particular situation—be it the study of inequality or discrimination. Statistical methodologies here “control” various indicators through tests of significance and through the use of tools such as mathematical analyses of regression.

Let me say right away here that this is not my favorite mode of analysis. Yet, I found myself having to directly take it on when the Indian government announced in 2020 that it was looking into further raising the minimum age of marriage for women from 18 to 21 years. Doing so, according to the government order, would combat a host of ills from maternal mortality and child health to gender-biased sex selection and further improve women’s educational and employment outcomes. All of this sounded very empowering and gained considerable publicity as being worthy of support. Marriage below the age of 18—child marriage—was already a huge agenda led by international agencies in which the violation of the rights of the child was invariably entangled within a host of reproductive and health outcomes. Of all the dimensions that shaped the destinies of women in India—their age at marriage was made out to be the “root cause” of their poverty, lack of education, proneness to violence, and overall isolation within a life of dependency. It therefore required wading fully into the world of statistical analysis to counter much of what was being claimed. As it turned out—when controlling for all other indicators—their age at marriage was the least significant factor shaping women’s life chances (John 2021a). Here was a situation where, in the context of a veritable multiplicity of oppressions, it became necessary to counter ideologically laden views claiming the truth of science and occupying the moral high ground of women’s and children’s rights. My kind of anti-intersectional analysis had to isolate the factor of age to prove that its role in perpetuating “harm” was in fact the least significant, while functioning worldwide and in India as a legal “fix” for a host of failures in realizing more genuine chances of greater freedom and autonomy.

17.1 In lieu of a conclusion

There could be no greater fan of the incredible testimony of the Combahee River Collective than myself. It is, moreover, a great text to wield in an Indian women’s studies classroom, given the heterogenous composition of our student body.

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously.

(1982, 16)

In several genealogical accounts of intersectionality, the Combahee River Collective stands apart since they went so far beyond the binary of race and gender. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor put it so well,

they were not only reacting to the deficits they found in organizations led by white women and Black men. They were also inspired by the national liberation and anti-colonial movements, from the Algerian struggle against the French occupation to the Vietnamese resistance to the American war. The C.R.C. saw themselves as

revolutionaries whose aspirations far exceeded women's rights: they aspired to the overthrow of capitalism.

(Taylor 2020)

This was no mere catalogue, but about claiming that Black women's freedom could only become a reality if all oppressions were to be overcome, including those many thousands of miles away from American shores. Forty years later, in the wake of Black Lives Matter, Taylor interviewed Barbara Smith, one of the pivotal members of the CRC who went on to found women's studies in US universities. Smith was cautious about BLM as a movement. "What's next? How do we mobilize all of this energy and actually bring about fundamental political, social, and economic change?"

We have reason in India to be more than cautious, if not skeptical. For intersectionality to genuinely index new subjectivities and lasting coalitions, it cannot turn into a talisman or a guarantee of superior politics. It has functioned best when it signaled failed appearances at the intersections and the kind of intellectual and political work that was needed to overcome those failures. I have suggested in these pages that certain kinds of non- or anti-intersectionality can also serve us in these dark times, depending on the struggle before us. From my discrepant location in India, what room is there for such thoughts to travel back to metropolitan centers like the US today?

Notes

- 1 A recent US manifestation of such hostility can be found in an essay by David McNally (2017). Not unsurprisingly, it is part of a new volume on social reproduction theory. In McNally's rather distorted rendering, the very undialectical notion of an intersection implied that theories of race and gender are taken to be independently constituted "bits" bearing no prior connections to one another. Unfortunately, this is one instance where the strength of Marxism only exposes all the more deeply its weakness—its totalizing world view.
- 2 Does this mean that questions of class have found their place in US theorizing, whether intersectional or otherwise? I look forward in particular to chapters in the present volume that address this question.
- 3 One of the most insightful gender theorists writing today that I would designate as a non-intersectional thinker is Andrea Long Chu. Consider her essay "On Liking Women" (2018) and *Females* (2019).
- 4 Rege's standpoint drew from but also creatively rewrote the feminist standpoint theories of Nancy Hartsock and Sandra Harding: "The Dalit feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of Dalit women, we recognise, may originate in the works of Dalit feminist intellectuals but it cannot flourish if isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups who must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and Utopias and the struggles of the marginalised. A transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause' is possible, for subjectivities can be transformed. By this we do not argue that non-Dalit feminists can 'speak as' or 'for the' Dalit women but they can 'reinvent themselves as Dalit feminists'" (Rege 1998, WS-45).

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THE CIRCULATION OF INTERSECTIONALITY IN CHINA¹

Lin Sun

The intersectional perspective is not unfamiliar to Chinese academia. Although in China, research on the theories of intersectionality and its localization emerged as late as 2016, the application of the perspective and methods of intersectionality began to increase after 2005. To date, intersectionality is mostly used in gender studies and sometimes employed in literary studies. On balance, intersectionality is of great significance to the improvement of Chinese feminism and the development of Chinese society because intersectionality can endow Chinese academics with a critical stance and “an analytic sensibility,” i.e., “adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 795), thereby advancing the self-examination and activism of Chinese feminism, the empowerment of disadvantaged groups, and the coverage of social justice in China. Specifically, for Chinese feminism, the analysis of mutually constituting relationships between different categories and interactive relations between multiple powers required by intersectionality can make up for the shortcomings of its theory and practice. When Chinese feminism came into being at the turn of the 20th century, raising women’s status and rejuvenating the nation were inseparable undertakings, but the former served the latter (Li 2016, 11–12; Gilmartin et al. 1994, 2). In the Mao Era (1949–1976), although women were mobilized to participate in socialist revolution and national construction in China, “class was the dominant analytic category” (Hershatter and Wang 2008, 1413) and “gender issues were reduced to class issues” (Yihui Su 2016, 232). In the 1980s, the post-Mao feminist movement called for an essentialized female consciousness, leading to “the rise of gender as a legitimate category of analysis and a simultaneous eclipse of class analysis” (Hershatter and Wang 2008, 1418) as well as the overlook of the difference and division within Chinese women. Over the last few decades, with an increasing divide between women from different classes, the poor and the rich as well as the urban and rural areas, gender theory, though widely applied in China, can hardly explain new social phenomena. In this regard, intersectionality injects vitality to review and refine Chinese feminism. For Chinese society, arising from the Black feminist movement, intersectionality shows great concern for the oppressed and forcefully resists such oppressive powers as capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism, which can provide a powerful weapon for China to keep the disadvantaged and marginalized groups in focus. In the past three decades, “drastic changes in Chinese political and social structures have transformed differences between people into inequalities” (Yihui Su 2016, 230). In addition, having permeated almost every corner of

the world, global capitalism intensifies the social divide in China. Under such circumstances, there emerge such disadvantaged and marginalized groups as migrant workers, rural left-behind children, and poor single mothers of ethnic groups in the backcountry in Chinese society. In this connection, intersectionality encourages people to pay attention to these groups and ponder over how to struggle against inequalities and move social justice forward. Given the significance of intersectionality to China, it is particularly necessary to do research on its circulation and localization in China.

So far, intersectionality has traveled in China mainly via the publication of academic research, which can be classified into three groups, namely the translation of intersectionality-related English scholarship (e.g., Smith 1992; hooks 2001, 1999; Rofel 2006; Jacka 2006b; Pun 2007; Solinger 2009; Ferguson 2018; Bruns 2019), the Chinese books and papers dealing with intersectionality per se or deploying intersectionality as their analytic tool (e.g., Ren and Pun 2006; Zheng 2007; Wu 2007; He, Xu, and Sun 2008; He 2009; Chen 2009; Tong 2010; Tao 2011; Huang, Wang, and Pan 2011; Choi and Du 2012; Ji 2011; Wang and Zhang 2012; Choi and Peng 2016; Yingyu Su 2016; Yihui Su 2016; Du 2017a, 2017b; Yihui Su and Hong 2017; Zhang 2018; Wang and Zong 2019; Wei and Li 2019; Wei and Li 2020), and English scholarship on the Chinese social and gender issues from an intersectional perspective or on intersectional narratology published in a Chinese academic journal (e.g., Gilmartin et al. 1994; Lee 1998; Solinger 1999; Entwisle and Henderson 2000; Pun 2005; Jacka 2006a; Hanser 2008; Yan 2008; Fan 2008; Gaetano 2008; Lanser 2010; Hershatter 2011; Pun and Chan 2013; Tian and Deng 2015; Choi and Peng 2015; Choi and Peng 2016). Apart from academic publication, courses in the fields of gender studies and literary studies, which are offered by institutions of higher learning (e.g., feminist criticism and postcolonial criticism courses), usually touch upon a little intersectionality-related knowledge. For instance, when Black feminism is mentioned in class, an initial introduction to the origin and perspective of intersectionality is often given. However, there has been no systematic instruction in intersectionality in higher education. Hence, through analyzing the major means of the circulation of intersectionality—academic publication—this chapter intends to examine and reflect on its circulation in China, so as to seek effective ways to enhance its further circulation and localization in the Chinese social and cultural contexts.

Based on the characteristics of the publication of intersectionality-related academic research in the aforementioned range, the circulation of intersectionality in China can be roughly divided into the following three stages: the first stage (1992–2004) is committed to introducing basic intersectionality-related knowledge; the second stage (2005–2015) is dedicated to applying the perspective and methods of intersectionality; the third stage (2016–the present) gives priority to researching the theories of intersectionality and innovative development of its localization.

The circulation of intersectionality in China started from translation. In January 1992, Barbara Smith's article "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" was translated and compiled by Jingyuan Zhang into a volume of translated texts titled *Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism*. By that time, the literary works of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Rita Dove had already been translated into Chinese, but Western feminism, gender studies, and the real circumstances of African American women were alien to Chinese people. In this case, Smith's article gave Chinese researchers and lovers of African American women's literature a new insight that African American women's unique lived experiences should be interpreted from multiple dimensions such as race, class, sex, and sexuality. From the 1980s onwards, Chinese women scholars came to realize that the woman question in China could not be fully explained or tackled by the Marxist theory of women, so they tried to find a way out. On the one hand, a number of centers for research on women at institutions of higher learning were founded to enhance Chinese research strength in women's studies. Prompted

by China's preparation for the forthcoming Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing from 1992 through 1995, the number of centers for research on women surged from three in 1992 to 22 in 1995 (Wei 2018, 77). On the other hand, Chinese women academics sought new theories from abroad and thus played an active role in strengthening communication and collaboration with overseas feminist scholars. Supported by such funding agencies as the Ford Foundation and the Mayling Soong Foundation, one of their fruitful endeavors was the success of the "Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State" conference at Harvard University, Wellesley College, and MIT in February 1992. At the conference, Chinese women scholars and feminist scholars from the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and other nations agreed on the agenda of introducing "gender" to the study of Chinese issues, when Chinese scholars were "largely unaware of the feminist concept of gender" (Hershatter and Wang 2008, 1417), let alone intersectionality. Even if gender was the keyword for the conference, scholars could not expand upon their topics without investigating the interaction between gender and class/sexuality/family/state power/other institutions. Afterward, their research findings presented at the conference were edited as an English volume (Gilmartin et al. 1994), which could be viewed as pioneering work on employing intersectional perspective to analyze Chinese gender issues.

The Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995 greatly facilitated the introduction to and circulation of Western feminism and gender studies in China. Between 1995 and 2004, a number of Chinese books and translations on Western feminist movements, theories, and literary criticism appeared. Among them, four Chinese books on gender studies, namely Xiaolan Bao's *An Introduction to Western Feminist Studies* (1995), Zheng Wang's *The Uprise of Women: The Contemporary Feminist Movement in the United States* (1995) and *Crossing Borders: Transcultural Feminist Practices* (2004), and Yinghe Li's *The Rise of Women's Power* (2003), used no more than 100 Chinese words to introduce Black feminism, pointing out that it emphasized the interactive relationship between race, gender, and class as well as multiple oppressions inflicted on American Black women. Additionally, Gang Luo and Xingyu Liu translated bell hooks' article "Revolutionary Black Women: Making Ourselves Subjects" and edited it into the volume named *Post-Colonial Cultural Theories* (1999). Two years later, Zheng Xiao and Lin Ping translated bell hooks' book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* into Chinese. All these translations repeatedly referred to multiple oppressions that Black women were long subject to and their persistent struggle against these oppressions. In most instances, the aforementioned Chinese books and translations were either listed as required readings for students of gender studies and literary studies in higher education or treated as reference works for scholars in gender studies and literary studies plus officials in the Women's Federation system. During the same period, an increasing number of scholars utilized the perspective of intersectionality to explore Chinese gender issues, like those about rural women, factory women workers, citizenship of migrant workers, as well as the role of capital, labor, and state in shaping gender identity in Chinese society (Lee 1995, 1998; Solinger 1999; Entwisle and Henderson 2000). Although the term intersectionality did not appear in their research, they examined the differences among Chinese women or citizenship of Chinese migrant workers from the angle of intersectionality, i.e., the interactive relationship between gender, class, the urban-rural dual structure, and sexuality affected by multiple structural factors like state, capital, labor, and culture. Nevertheless, due to the lack of profound experience and field research in China, some non-Chinese scholars explored the issues on the basis of secondary sources, giving birth to biased opinions and conclusions. Taken together, efforts made by Chinese and non-Chinese scholars alike in the first stage are fundamental to the circulation of intersectionality in China because, without this stage, it would have been impossible for the Chinese to have access to the novel concept and

perspective, and the contributions of these scholars lay the groundwork for the application of the perspective and methods in Chinese academia in next stage.

If the seed of intersectionality was introduced to China in the first stage, the seed was planted and underwent experimentation in the Chinese academic soil in the second stage, which, in many aspects, enabled the circulation of intersectionality to reach a new height. The shift between the first and second stages was fostered by efforts in developing women's studies as a discipline from institutions of higher learning, social organizations, and the state in the first phase. In terms of institutions of higher learning, their women's studies research and teaching gained strength. For example, the number of centers for research on women at universities increased steadily from 22 in 1995 to 53 in 2004. In 1998, Peking University first put women's studies as an area of specialization for graduate study, and as of 2004, five more universities followed suit (Wei 2018, 71), which were conducive to the cultivation of women's studies professionals. Accordingly, the curriculum for women's studies majors was set up and introductory courses on women's studies were offered to all undergraduates for the purpose of liberal education. Along with curriculum development, textbooks sprang up. Just between 2000 and 2004, eight women's studies textbooks for higher education emerged (Wei 2018, 75–6). In order to enhance intercollegiate collaboration in constructing the discipline of women's studies and promoting its teaching and research, beginning in 2001, 24 universities agreed to build a cooperative team (Wei 2018, 76). From 1998 through 2004, five national and one international conferences were held on the discipline and curriculum development of women's studies by Chinese universities (Wei 2018, 76). As for social organizations, they made earnest endeavors to improve the position of women's studies in Chinese social sciences and advance the development of women's studies. Among them, the Chinese Women's Research Society (CWRS) and the Chinese Society for Women's Studies (CSWS) were the most important groups. Founded in 1999, CWRS was the largest national academic society for women's studies, which called for project tenders, held annual conferences, symposiums, and summit forums, organized training programs, published books, and selected outstanding scholarship, etc. Likewise, organized by overseas Chinese women scholars in 1989, CSWS solicited international funding agencies' support and worked with domestic women academics "to run faculty training workshops, publish teaching materials, translate feminist scholarship, create courses on women and gender, organize conferences, and set up graduate programs on gender studies" (Hershatter and Wang 2008, 1419). As far as the state is concerned, it increased policy and financial support for the research and teaching of women studies. For instance, published by the State Council of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2001, the *Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2001–2010)* stated that gender consciousness should be incorporated into teacher training, and such courses as women's studies, Marxist theory of women, and gender and development should be offered in higher education. As an official organization led by the Communist Party of China (CPC), the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) proved to be a catalyst for the implementation of state policies and the supply of assistance to both institutions of higher learning and social organizations for the development of women's studies.

Following big progress in the development of women's studies in the first stage, between 2005 and 2015, the perspective and methods of intersectionality won a wide application in China in terms of the proliferation and deepening of intersectionality-inflected research in the fields of gender studies, literary studies, and Black feminist studies. On the one hand, as for gender studies that had already utilized intersectionality in their research, research objects were broadened and research content was deepened. First, research objects incorporated not only rural women and female factory workers (e.g., Jacka 2006a, 2006b; He, Xu, and Sun 2008; Tao 2011; Hershatter 2011), but also male migrant workers, female migrant workers at restau-

rants, and female domestic workers (e.g., Hanser 2008; Yan 2008; Huang, Wang, and Pan 2011; Tian and Deng 2015). Second, in-depth research was carried out, including the examination of the relationship between gender and such power structures as social, political, cultural, and economic structures, plus the interaction between gender, class, the urban-rural dual structure, age, etc. (e.g., Pun 2005; Fan 2008; Gaetano 2008; Tong 2010; Choi and Du 2012; Choi and Peng 2015). Third, based on the perspective of intersectionality, the compilation of translated articles introduced the theory of masculinities to Chinese readers (Wang and Zhang 2012). On the other hand, advances in literary studies and Black feminist studies were made by the use of the intersectional perspective. In terms of literary studies, Susan S. Lanser (2010) published an English academic paper *Are We There Yet? The Intersectional Future of Feminist Narratology* in one of China's core journals on non-Chinese literary studies, proposing employing the analytical lens of intersectionality to promote feminist narratology. Following this proposal, Liu (2014) analyzed the spatial-temporal intersectional narrative pattern and negative plotting in one of Alice Munro's works, *Runaway*. Meanwhile, Ji (2011) interpreted the themes, techniques, and literary features by way of using the paradigm of simultaneous and interlocking oppressions, which was cutting-edge novel research at that time. As for Black feminist studies, on the basis of multiple identities and oppressions of Black women, Wu (2007) probed into the interactive relationship between Black feminism and race/gender/class/sexuality politics in an attempt to expand the boundaries of Black women's identities. By and large, gender studies in this stage were mostly empirical and case studies that adopted the process-center model of intersectionality. But they tended to stress individual identity at the micro level, incurring the neglect of institutional factors at the macro level. As for literary and Black feminist studies which put intersectionality into use, they failed to discuss the interactive relationship between different categories and analyze the influences of this interaction. Moreover, systematic research on the theories of intersectionality was yet to come. To a certain extent, the limited understanding of the theories of intersectionality hindered the circulation and application of intersectionality in this phase.

Since 2016, scholars have been seeking a breakthrough in the study of intersectionality by embarking on investigating the theories of intersectionality. The trailblazing move is inseparable from efforts in strengthening research on the theories of women and furthering the discipline of women's studies in the second stage. In 2006, the undergraduate program of women's studies, the first of its kind in China, was offered by China Women's University. The same year also witnessed the elevation of women's studies from an area of specialization to a graduate program and a sub-discipline under the discipline of sociology at Peking University. For the sake of providing a national platform for women's studies, ACWF, the PRC Ministry of Education, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and the Party School of CPC built 21 research and training centers for women's/gender studies across the nation in that year, with 13 centers situated at the institutions of higher learning. As of 2006, a specific chapter was set aside to introduce and discuss the theories of women in most of the undergraduate and graduate women's studies textbooks for the enhancement of students' theoretical foundation; besides, CWRS started to select outstanding theses and dissertations on women's/gender studies once two years. Put forward by PRC State Council in 2011, the *Program for the Development of Chinese Women (2011–2020)* made it clear that more national and local social science funds should be allocated to projects related to gender and women's development, so as to promote the study of the theories of women; meanwhile, it encouraged the institutions of higher learning to set up the major of women's studies, offer women's studies courses, and train women's studies professionals. Ever since then, institutions of higher learning and research institutes have given full play to their academic strengths and collaborated in studying the theories of women. Equally important was the rapid develop-

ment of women's studies network resources and databases in China in the second stage, which gave an impetus to the groundbreaking research of women's/gender studies.

Thanks to the reinforcement of the theories of women, researchers, for one thing, examined the theories, methodology, development, and applicability of intersectionality; for another, they explored possible ways to localization and innovative development of intersectionality in the Chinese social context. Generally speaking, research in this stage can be categorized into four parts. First is the study of the theories of intersectionality. There have been both Chinese papers that described and discussed the origin, concepts, methods, and disputes of intersectionality as well as the necessity, limitations, and feasibility of its localization (e.g., Yihui Su 2016; Zhang 2018) and a translated article that acknowledged intersectionality as the analytical approach of important contemporary feminist theory and analyzed the connotations, features, contributions, and trend of intersectionality (e.g., Ferguson 2018). Second is the innovative development of the theories of intersectionality. For instance, Du (2017b) engaged intersectionality with the theory of masculinities and constructed an improved theory of male traits. In addition, while studying ecofeminism, Wei and Li (2019, 2020) brought such nonhuman others as nature and animals into the paradigm of intersectionality, arguing that ecofeminism was a good example of intersectional feminism and environmental justice should be added as one of the categories of intersectionality. These theoretical developments, in a great measure, expanded the research dimension. Third is the localization of the theories of intersectionality. Wang and Zong (2019) made attempts to build the localized analytic framework of the intersectional theory for the analysis of Chinese women of ethnic groups. Du (2017a) and Su and Hong (2017) probed into traits of male migrant workers in China's manufacturing industry and salesmen in China's service industry respectively by utilizing the localized theory of masculinities on the basis of the intersectional perspective. Fourth is the application of intersectionality in the new fields. In this period, aside from the empirical studies of male and female migrant workers by means of the perspective and methods of intersectionality (e.g., Choi and Peng 2016; Yingyu Su 2016), intersectionality was also applied in the fields of cultural studies and legal studies (e.g., Shi 2016; Bruns 2019). As a whole, though these explorations were in their infancy, they showed an increasing depth and width of the circulation of intersectionality in China along with critical reflections on and flexible utilization of intersectionality and consequently inspired more scholars to select intersectionality as their research object or apply its perspective, methods, and theories in their research.

The circulating process of intersectionality in China reveals that, different from the deductive development of intersectionality from theory interpretation to specific application in Western society, China experiences the inductive development of intersectionality from the empirical application of its perspective and methods to the exploration and refinement of its theories. The distinction consists in the difference between the Chinese and Western academic traditions. Much affected by Confucianism, academic research in China centers on people with the aim to solve practical problems and acquire knowledge from practice. In contrast, upholding the Western philosophical spirit, Western academic research focuses on material objects and phenomena and advocates acquiring knowledge and theories before applying them to address issues (Qian 2013, 75, 80). To be clear, such academic thoughts as Black feminism should not be included in the Western academic tradition. Just as Christina Sharpe argued, owing to "the long and brutal history of the violent annotations of Black being" (2016, 115), Black feminists "must become undisciplined" and "discard, discount, disregard, jettison, abandon, and measure those ways of knowing and to enact epistemic violence" (13). In addition, although intersectionality has been circulated and developed to a certain degree in China in the past two decades, the scope of its circulation still concentrates on the same fields as those

when intersectionality was first introduced to China, i.e., gender studies and literary studies. The root cause is the insufficient understanding and inadequate localization of intersectionality in China. Specifically speaking, there are four major deterrents to the reach and development of intersectionality.

First of all, the research on intersectionality, its theories, and localization, in particular, starts late, and the communication and learning of intersectionality are limited. Up until now, only a small number of non-Chinese academic papers and books on intersectionality have been translated and published in China, and Chinese scholars have just begun to research the theories and localization of intersectionality. Meanwhile, the cooperation and communication in intersectionality between Chinese and non-Chinese scholars are inadequate, and the teaching and learning of intersectionality in higher education are sketchy. All these circumstances restrict the understanding and circulation of intersectionality in China.

Moreover, the vagueness of intersectionality's definition, the multiformity of its categories, and the complexity of its mechanism pose a big challenge for intersectional scholars. For instance, with regard to defining intersectionality, scholars were divided over whether to take it as a theory, a method, a paradigm, or both a theory and a method. There is no definite answer to the dispute yet. As for determining categories for intersectional analysis, researchers have to add or reduce certain categories of intersectionality in accordance with their specific research subjects, purposes, and goals. While employing intersectionality in their research, those who have adopted the process-center model or the systematic model are required to not only pay attention to the interactive relationship between multiple categories but also take notice of the mutual construction between the subject and various structures. Moreover, the intersectional paradigm needs to be situated in the dynamic context. But in China, scholars are scarcely experts in both the theories and methods of intersectionality. Therefore, it is difficult to make big progress in understanding its theories and maximizing its use.

Furthermore, one has multiple identities and these identities keep changing in different stages of life and at different places. Thus, the strong and weak status of the subject should be investigated in accordance with the specific spatial-temporal context. For example, when young people are compared with themselves in old age in terms of economic status and health, they are normally in the stronger state; however, with regard to family status and influences in the Chinese cultural context of respecting the old and putting filial piety first, young people are actually in the weaker state. For another example, globalization makes both intra-national and transnational mobility more frequent, so one may start with a strong state at the origin place and turn to be in a weak state at a second location, and further change to another state in the following destinations. Under such circumstances, it is imperative to view one's various and fluid identities in the ever-changing space and time from the historical and dialectic perspectives, which evidently sets a high requirement for scholars' rigorous thinking and academic credentials.

Finally, China has its distinctive historical, political, social, and cultural backgrounds from Western countries. As a result, before applying it, intersectionality should be innovatively localized instead of being adopted directly, which inevitably slows down the circulation and application of intersectionality in China. For instance, the categories of intersectionality have to be adjusted for its situated use in China. Arising out of Black feminism in the American context, intersectionality regards race as an indispensable category. Nonetheless, in China, race is not an essential category, because ethnic groups account for 8 percent of the total population and they are generally on friendly terms with each other (Zhang 2018, 93). At the same time, "as the most realistic or most superstitious nation with the least religious faith in the world" (Zheng 2021, 65), religion exerts much smaller influences than ethics and state power on Chinese society. Altogether, the four problems are roadblocks to the understanding and application of intersec-

tionality, which determines that the circulation and localization of intersectionality in China can hardly be materialized on a large scale in a short time.

Targeting the aforementioned problems and difficulties, possible solutions are proposed to address them. As for the first three problems, more endeavors should be made to prompt the translation of non-Chinese research findings on intersectionality and strengthen the cooperation and communication in intersectionality between Chinese and non-Chinese scholars, e.g., holding international symposiums or workshops on intersectionality. Additionally, special columns can be set up on a regular basis to publish the latest scholarship on intersectionality, and both Chinese and non-Chinese academic foundations can give greater financial support to the publication of translated books and research projects relating to intersectionality. Lastly, faculty training and seminars on intersectionality can be offered at institutions of higher learning, thereby advancing the teaching, learning, and understanding of intersectionality.

As for the last and also most difficult problem, there are several ways to promote the localization of intersectionality in China via its situated use. First and foremost, with the approach of “cultural awareness” adopted to reflect on Chinese culture and society, it can be found that such structural factors as ethnics, state power, and grassroots organizations should never be underestimated or overlooked in the Chinese social and cultural contexts. According to the preeminent Chinese social anthropologist Fei Xiaotong who put forward “cultural awareness,” one should be fully aware of one’s culture and society; specifically, one ought to examine and understand the origin, forming process, characteristics, and trends of one’s culture and society without bearing an attitude of cultural regression (2014, 160–1). As an ethics-based society, China attaches great importance to social ethics with “benevolence and righteousness” advocated by Confucianism as its core values. Having played a quasi-religious role, the ethical relationship permeates social life and political governance and is integrated into the everyday life of the common people in China (Liang 2018, 147–52). Hence, ethics, to a great extent, regularizes one’s behaviors, attitudes, and choices. For this reason, when intersectionality is used, particular attention should be paid to the impacts of ethics in family relationships, marital status, and fertility (e.g., the ability to reproduce, bearing a boy or a girl) on its categories. Moreover, it is important to take notice of the role of the state in shaping one’s identity and status. As far as the Chinese historical tradition is concerned, “as a rule, politics and society are fully integrated” (Qian 2013, 42). Such being the case, the state, similar to the patriarch of a big family, plays a leading role in social affairs. Meanwhile, different from Western civil society which modernized its industrial civilization from bottom to top, China lacks the tradition of the rule of law, the sense of rights, and life experiences within organizations, and, once a semi-colony, is deficient in endogenous dynamics to realize its modernization. In this case, there must be a powerful state to lead national liberation and industrial development from top to bottom. Since the implementation of reform and opening-up policy, China has undergone a transformation from a planned economy to a market economy. During the process, the one-dimensional governance structure of “state plus society” is being reformed as “the mixed governance structure with the leadership of the government and participation of the market and social forces” (Ge 2019, 55). At present, “a strong state intervention” (Li 2021, 105–6) remains a salient feature of the Chinese social structure. Furthermore, the influences of grassroots organizations should be taken into account. From the Han Dynasty onwards, one’s clans, neighbors, and associates have overlapped, forming influential local social forces with a high level of local autonomy (Hsu 2017, 170–1). In accordance with the historical record, in the early period of the Republic of China, “apart from paying for taxes, the common people did not have to deal with the local government” (quoted in Liang 2018, 85). Afterward, in the era of China’s revolutionary war, CPC established grassroots organizations at all levels bound up with state power (Duara 2008, 214) and created an underly-

ing structure (Huang 2015, 330), achieving the combination of from bottom to top and from top to bottom. Therefore, when intersectionality is utilized to examine the issues in ancient China, local social forces are significant factors that need to be considered; when intersectionality is used to analyze modern and contemporary Chinese issues, the strength of urban and rural grassroots organizations ought not to be omitted. For instance, benefiting from the effective social mobilization and organization by neighborhood committees and village councils, the COVID-19 epidemic has been quickly contained in China and vaccination and other preventative measures have been swiftly carried out. In everyday life, it is these grassroots organizations that show concern for the solitary elderly, stay-at-home children, the handicapped, and people who quarantine at home because of potential infection of COVID-19. It should be pointed out that, when treating ethics, state power, and grassroots as social factors in intersectionality-related research, particular attention is to be paid to not only multiple oppressions that result from the interactive relationship between these social factors and various categories, but also “the possibility for improvement that is caused by mutual restraint or mutual weakening” between them (Zheng 2007, 225).

Next, based on the contemplation of and reflection on one’s society and culture, the dialogue and joint development between China and Western academia should be reinforced. Since the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period in Chinese history, a complex philosophy comprised of the earthly order centered on Confucianism and the natural order revolving around *Yin Yang* and the Five Elements has been formulated, which fosters the holistic view of “the unity of heaven and man” in Chinese culture (Hsu 2017, 85). To some extent, the holistic view coincides with the thesis of “big history” argued by some Western scholars in recent decades, who put together research in the fields of natural, human, and social sciences. It is probable that the “big history” perspective and methodology in line with the Chinese way of thinking can help achieve the localization and circulation of intersectionality in China. A case in point is the aforementioned research that some Chinese scholars reconfigured the intersectionality framework by introducing biological elements such as animals and the environment into their ecofeminist studies. Nowadays, no one can ignore the impacts of the virus in the post-epidemic era, and disadvantaged groups are more likely to be infected with the virus and even die. Viewed in this light, when intersectionality is applied to study the conditions of the rural solitary elderly, the mental health of pupils, the living circumstances of urban takeaway riders, and the reverse migration of rural labor, etc., the geographical and ecological factors can be taken into consideration for intersectional analysis. Undoubtedly, it requires breaking the barriers among different disciplines and employing interdisciplinary knowledge.

Last, while the dimension of time helps us look into issues in a dynamic way, the dimension of space opens the door for us to do intersectional research in a comprehensive and penetrating way. In the age of information and network, the influence of space of flows is steadily rising. As “the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows” (Castells 2001, 505), space of flows has become a dominant force in the internet society. It not only strengthens or weakens the inequalities caused by such intersectional categories as gender, race, class, age, etc., but also interacts with the space of places and fractionates it, resulting in “the fourth world.” Coined by Manuel Castells, “the fourth world” refers to space that is excluded from the dominating space of flows and under-segmentation. Space of flows, though invisible, is worth much attention at the moment. Because COVID-19 spurs the rapid development of e-finance, e-commerce, the internet medical service, telecommuting, and online education in China, the impacts of space of flows grow accordingly. It is likely that space of flows will become a new perspective for intersectional scholars to respond to practical issues and push forward further development of intersectionality in China.

Overall, the circulation of intersectionality in China indicates the collision and interaction of Chinese and Western culture, which in consequence enhance their communication and dialogue coupled with common development. For this matter, there lies some reason to believe that, born in Western society and full of humanistic concern, intersectionality will be more widely circulated and better developed in ethics-based and people-centered China after it is deeply understood and innovatively localized in this nation. But, owing to differences in academic traditions, cultural traits, and national conditions between China and Western countries together with the complexity of intersectionality, it is bound to be a long and arduous journey, which demands further mutual understanding and mutual learning between the two cultures, more international intellectual interchange and collaboration, and the reflective application of intersectionality without weakening its critical and political nature.

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19

LOVING CRITIQUE

On intersectionality and ambiguity in North Africa and West Asia

Maie Panaga and Sara Salem

19.1 Introduction

Intersectionality is undoubtedly one of the most visible interventions to emerge within feminist theory over the past few decades, shifting the way many of us write, think, read, and understand the world. Intersectionality is also a word and an idea that has traveled extensively, both across geographical space and between different spaces of thinking and activism, from the academy to social movements. As with many ideas that become highly popular, intersectionality has increasingly been critically questioned, with scholars exploring its assumptions, its supposed “newness,” the ways in which it has traveled (or not traveled), and its various co-optations.¹ This chapter explores how we might think through debates around intersectionality beyond the Global North, taking seriously other geographical and institutional spaces as sites of feminist theorizing around intersectionality. The concept can undoubtedly be understood as a global one; however, doing so requires that we theorize it from different global locations.

Two influential pieces are worth touching on, as they sketch out the debate around intersectionality and its future in ways that are very relevant to this piece. The first is Sirma Bilge’s *Intersectionality Undone*,² which discusses the “whitening of intersectionality” through its co-optation by white liberal feminists within the academy. This process of whitening renders intersectionality less radical than its origins propose, making it palatable to forms of feminism that want to continue marginalizing questions of Black feminism and racism more broadly. The second is Jennifer Nash’s monumental book, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*,³ which explores the debates around intersectionality’s origins as well as the affective response of defensiveness that has emerged through attempts to regulate where intersectionality came from and how it can be used. Taken together, these texts address crucial questions that emerged throughout our interviews with feminist activists and scholars in North Africa and West Asia around what intersectionality “really is” versus how it has been co-opted by a whole variety of people and organizations and states, as well as what it might mean to move beyond defending, defining, and delineating intersectionality in the present.

Alongside these texts, we also draw on theorizations of traveling theory, as originally put forward by Edward Said.⁴ Questions of traveling, solidarity, and transnationalism have also been elaborated in work by Chandra Mohanty, which we have been greatly influenced by.⁵ Because this chapter focuses on interviews with feminist activists and theorists in West Asia and North

Africa, many of the conversations focused on the question of how intersectionality traveled to the region, what made this travel possible, what “baggage” it traveled with, and what it might have displaced through its arrival. Edward Said noted that theories never travel neutrally; they are always affected by their point of origin, while also transforming at their point of arrival. We were interested in how activists and theorists in the region understand this process of travel, particularly its roots (here we mean the term itself) in Western academic spaces.

Perhaps a word that characterizes many of the conversations we had is *ambiguity*. We found—and this is a sentiment we share—that for many feminists in the region, intersectionality was an important idea and concept that opened up ways of articulating feminism in crucial ways. It also allowed for transnational conversations around a shared idea, or word, that in some ways elided the need for extensive translation. It seems to us that intersectionality stood in for a particular feminist project with roughly shared assumptions and that there is an attachment to this that continues despite the “intersectionality debates” that have taken place recently. Yet, at the same time, the ambiguity comes in at the point of critically assessing what intersectionality has equally made *less possible*. Here we found that for many feminists, this contemporary moment is marked by an intense desire to question and perhaps even let go of intersectionality, for many different reasons that we explore below. Between attachment and disavowal, we find that many are ambiguous about what intersectionality means to them *now*, and perhaps clearer about what it meant in the recent past.

Through sharing these conversations, which were extensive and which we ourselves participated in as non-objective feminists from the region, we hope to capture some of the feelings, thoughts, and theorizations that feminists in West Asia and North Africa are having around intersectionality today. We imagine this less as a theoretical piece or intervention, and we do not have a central argument or thesis; rather, we want to use this space to share vignettes from feminists who have spent much time and care thinking through the topics this edited volume is interested in. We begin by introducing our methods and ourselves, providing some more information about the conversations. We then structure this piece into three thematic sections, based on some of the topics that came up repeatedly: the tensions embedded within traveling feminist concepts; the question of missing intersections; and what it means to come together as feminists today.

Our collaborative process started in January 2021 with an invitation from Sara Salem, based at the London School of Economics, to Maie Panaga, co-founder of the Cairo-based Ikhtyar Feminist Collective that is devoted to feminist knowledge production in Arabic, covering the areas of feminism and sexuality. It was not the first conversation we had about the topic of intersectionality, since we had shared many feminist spaces and worked on various projects together from 2011 onwards. However, this time was different as it was marked by a heavy period of confusion, grief, and anger given the broader context of the pandemic. This initial conversation was followed by many others throughout the first part of the year, and we found that the conversations focused on both the subject of intersectionality as well as how best to write about it. We then came to the idea of opening the door to collective dialogue with others who might be interested and who share some of our conflicting feelings about intersectionality and the way it has traveled in North Africa and West Asia. We envisioned these dialogues through the form of semi-structured interviews, and based on this we formulated a document containing 12 questions to be shared with participants. An email invitation was then drafted and we initially invited 33 people involved in feminist organizing, activism, and academia, located between Egypt, Lebanon, New York, the UK, Canada, and the Western Sahara. During the following months, we were able to complete 11 individual interviews and three collective interviews (with two to three participants in one sitting). Throughout these interviews we did not shy away from

interacting and engaging as participants, acknowledging our own intellectual and emotional investments in the subjects being discussed.

Walking in and out of each interview we found our assumptions about the region and its organizing constantly challenged. We also spent some time reflecting on the limitations of the project, in particular, that the group did not include feminists from older generations, and was quite focused on feminists in and from Arab-majority countries. Finally, it was apparent that the people we interviewed in various places brought with them particular orientations toward contemporary politics that went beyond feminism, though they were articulated through feminism in the interviews. We noted, for instance, a general disenchantment with politics and the political among Egyptian respondents, which we believe has as much to do with the overall political context in Egypt today as it does with feminist mobilization.

In any case, these collective conversations created a learning space for us not only in terms of the region's lived realities and complexities but regarding thinking through theories and their use, political imagination and hope, the daily interaction, evaluation, and even development of our frameworks, and, above all, the ways in which these conversations can be carried out with kindness and sensitivity toward both the origins and destinations of theories and ideas.

19.2 The tensions embedded within traveling

In this chapter we are particularly interested in exploring the idea of traveling theory, and what happens when theories like intersectionality travel from the Global North to the Global South. Previous work has explored this notion of intersectionality and its global movements, and there are particular dimensions to this movement that emerged from our interviews that we structure this section around. As one respondent noted, when theories travel and/or are “mainstreamed” they can sometimes “turn into commodities and stop being threatening.” This comment was made in the context of Egypt and in response to the way in which parts of the feminist movement deploy intersectionality as something that feminism should be, rather than as a frame of analysis.

The first dimension that emerged was the power of academia—European and US academia in particular—in propelling certain concepts and theories forward at a global level. The second dimension emerged from this question and focused on the way the centrality of US knowledge production at times centered frameworks that did not speak directly to contexts in the Global South. In this instance, many respondents raised the importance of thinking about local histories such as the Arab slave trade and their role in racialization in North Africa and West Asia, and why local knowledge production was important in highlighting different sets of structures and events.

19.2.1 Academic knowledge production and power relations

The question of knowledge production and power emerged strongly across all of our interviews, suggesting tensions around how knowledge from the West—and in particular the US—is able to travel to the Global South and influence local understandings in ways that are both productive and unproductive. Here, activist and NGO spaces were also mentioned as occasions during which there was an imbalance of power. One respondent recalled a conference for activists and human rights workers at which there was a heated discussion around how much people from the Global South knew about the US, and how rare it was for this to be reciprocated. She cited the example of how few African feminists were known in that space by activists from the US, and yet how many of the activists from the Global South were able to name numerous US feminists. Similarly, another respondent, reflecting on a queer event in Germany, asked: “Was

this event about intersectionality in queer spaces or Americans in queer spaces?” They went on to note that there was a certain power that came with being fluent in the language deployed by US activists and academics, of “being able to tap into those vocabularies.” This was a sentiment that we heard frequently and was always understood in terms of a knowledge power imbalance that produces a world in which US and European academic work, cultural production, and political developments were familiar to people in other parts of the world, while work, culture, and politics happening in the Global South was often not legible or known to those based in the US or Europe, even when they were involved in transnational activism, human rights work, or academia.

One respondent reflected back on the moment they came across the term intersectionality. After years of their involvement in queer and feminist organizing in Lebanon, they noted that when we speak of traveling theories we are not only speaking of intersectionality but many other theories that traveled with mainly white Western academics arriving in the region to engage with the context, bringing with them not only theories but also assumptions about the respective countries that they find themselves in. Often this meant fitting the local context into those aforementioned theories and assumptions, which often led to tensions with local groups. Moreover, before the introduction of many terms that are seen to have emerged from the West, local activists and organizers were already thinking about the best ways of achieving social justice in that particular space and time. The absence of a particular term or theory did not necessarily mean the absence of efforts to understand and highlight how different forms of power and identity interact, as one respondent noted.

The same respondent went on to note that at some point, academics from the US in Lebanon began to use the term intersectionality but more importantly to critique the way that local activism was thinking about power and identity. For them, this led to an imbalance in power, where academics were seen as knowledge producers rather than a situation where local organizing was what informed the way the region was understood. They added:

It ended with us performing the theory and this took a lot of the lived realities and daily organising out of the picture. It contributed to damaging the possibilities that could have come from an organic understanding of intersectionality within the framework of the solidarity and liberation agenda.

Another respondent highlighted their frustration with the role of gender studies in North Africa and West Asia as a site of imperial knowledge production, through choices about which theories are better suited to analyzing the context and where theories that emerged from the West are still being introduced as the “main” theories and tools of analysis, usually also excluding work by Black women and women of color in the Global North. They went on to give the example of the theorizing around the War on Terror and how this tends to focus on the effects of the War on Terror in the West rather than the Global South. They noted that there is less work on how the War on Terror functions in North Africa and West Asia, for instance, and how it racializes certain populations. This is something we see on the part of the Turkish state in relation to the Kurdish population or the Lebanese state in relation to Syrian and Palestinian refugees. They said:

I find myself sometimes asking the question to people who are studying race in the Gulf or another context in the MENA: What do you mean by race? It is very specific and racialization is different from race; they are interconnected and one of the things we are missing is how race developed in our own context versus how it developed in the West. This is not to say that this history is not violent but it's different.

Although we touch on this in the next section, it is useful here to underline the point that this focus on the US and/or Europe often precluded connections that could be formed elsewhere, primarily with other people, movements, or institutions in the Global South. There was a sense that there was more to be learned from other southern countries, with similar experiences of military dictatorship, structural adjustment, coloniality, and extractivism, and yet the tendency seemed often to be to speak in and through feminists and activists in the West. One respondent noted:

When I read Western scholars, I sometimes think: I can't write half of what you're writing [given the authoritarian political context and the question of censorship]. I wish I knew more about women academics who write under dictatorship. Instead we are constantly talking to the West, which makes knowledge production alienating—yes, the word for it is alienating. There is an intense power imbalance.

19.2.2 The effects of Arab racism and the question of diaspora

In one of our first interviews, one respondent suggested that central to the tensions around how intersectionality has traveled is that “it travelled as a set of applications, not as a lens. The tool itself is not what travelled. This makes us ignore our own realities in Egypt.” In this section, we explore some of the reflections on this sentiment that “Egyptian (or other local) realities” have slipped out of the picture when intersectionality is deployed, and that histories of racism, racialization, and enslavement in the Egyptian and broader Arab-majority context have slipped out of view. Although central to processes of racialization in North Africa and West Asia, the Arab slave trade has not been as well documented or researched as the transatlantic slave trade within academic writing. However, its history is one that people know of, making it important to be doubtful of claims that slavery and racism against people of African descent is something that is relevant to the US context alone.

Numerous respondents commented on the erasure of racism within North Africa and West Asia, noting that Western racism against Arabs is what is always centered. One respondent noted,

We have not dealt with racism in our region. We talk about it more since the Black Lives Matter protests last year, but when it comes to decoloniality in the region, it is always about us in relation to Europe or the West, but not in relation to Arabism or Islam which also have their own colonial roots.

This notion of Arabism and Islam as having their own colonial roots is crucial to note, particularly in relation to North Africa but also beyond. Here questions of which histories are centered in discussions of inequality have important ramifications for the intersections that emerge in public debate, activism, and academic work. One point that needs more attention is what people mean by “race” as part of intersectionality, and the importance of historicizing and contextualizing what this category denotes in different contexts, while still making space for the global nature of forms of racism that have emerged from enslavement.

Connected to the question of local contexts is the question of the diaspora. Many of the interesting conversations we had touched on the centrality of the North African and West Asian diaspora in the West to debates around race and colonialism. On the one hand, this tends to center one particular diaspora (in the West) over others, which has the effect of centering anti-Arab racism and white supremacy. On the other hand, many of the crucial debates around intersectionality have taken place in North African and West Asian diasporas in Western coun-

tries, and these have richly contributed to knowledge production and activism. Nevertheless, the location of these diasporas in the West is important to note. As one respondent said, “The diaspora needs to recognise Arab racism as well as white racism.” We might ask which forms of racism emerge when we look at different diasporas, rather than centering diasporas in the West (who are often more legible through their use of English).

19.3 Missing intersections: connections to the Global South

Many of our conversations touched on relationality, and the idea that those of us involved in feminist organizing and academia from North Africa and West Asia often think of ourselves in relation to the West. This came up when some respondents noted the fact that people in the Global South often have quite detailed knowledge of Global North politics, and also when respondents pointed to the power of Western academia, activism, and funding bodies to influence the theories and concepts we all use. When we pressed further, some respondents made interesting points about the need for more South–South connections, particularly when it comes to feminism and social justice. As mentioned in a previous section, one respondent said that they would love to read more about how other women living under military dictatorships experienced academia and writing. Similarly, another respondent noted the similar experiences with military regimes in Latin America, and how it might be more important that Egyptians and other people across the region look more closely at Latin American experiences. This was seen as something that was discouraged because of structural factors, such as the knowledge we are exposed to in the classroom or the spaces we are encouraged to engage with (academic journals, academic conferences, etc.).

One respondent noted that they first came across intersectionality through Latinx feminists, in Spanish, and that these conversations across the South were important to their thinking on gender. Another respondent pointed out that when it comes to feminist movements, we can’t speak of an international feminist movement, only a transnational one—there are connections between countries but not necessarily what we might call an international feminist movement. One reason given for the absence of more South–South conversations is the question of translation. Often, as one respondent noted, feminist texts in Egypt are written in English, which often orients the text and movement toward the West. They said it was important to think of how we can foster other types of conversations, especially with spaces or movements that share similar circumstances. Here they gave the example of the Zapatistas and Palestinians. Another respondent gave the example of a conference she was at on the subject of precarity, where she realized that the precarity she was writing about—which had as much to do with police violence in Egypt—was similar only to a paper by a participant from Bangladesh. She goes on to reflect on how this drew them together and made them think about how certain ideas (like precarity) are defined through Western experiences, and how this in turn structures spaces and discussions in particular ways.

One of the most prominent themes that came up in almost every interview was that of missing intersections, or intersections that respondents felt were crucial to local contexts but that were often missing from discussions or understandings of intersectionality. This reflects the sentiment expressed earlier in the piece that intersectionality traveled as a set of applications, not as a lens. Because the tool itself is not what traveled, according to this view, intersections that emerge from or are more pertinent to local contexts are sometimes erased. This piece is thus part of a broader conversation in the region to think more specifically about what intersectionality means to us, and what forms of intersectional work and activism speak to as many people as possible. Indeed, some of the primary “missing intersections” that were brought up were reli-

gion, citizenship status, and class, intersections that are part of the lived experiences of millions of people across the region.

In the words of one respondent: “How can you live in Egypt and not see religion?” Religion emerged as a primary “missing intersection” among respondents in Egypt. Indeed, religion remains one of the most important structural and interpersonal forms of inequality in Egypt, affecting all non-Muslims and including Egypt’s Coptic population. Other respondents brought up the intersection of citizenship status and the need for more thought around how it intersects with race in the context of North Africa and West Asia. Here it should be noted that migration status is a big determining factor in how class, gender, race, religion, and beyond are experienced in Egypt, as elsewhere. Class was brought up repeatedly as an intersection that seemed to be slipping out of view. As one respondent noted, “Everyone talks about intersectionality but no one talks about class.” This was juxtaposed to feminist activism from the 1950s and 1960s that centered questions of class through an anti-capitalist orientation. One fascinating discussion that emerged was around the difference between “class” and “capitalism” and how when class is mobilized in feminist circles it can sometimes refer to cultural attributes rather than the position one holds within the structure of capitalism: “What does class mean? They’re talking about manerisms or different forms of middle-classness, not class as income, how you sell your labour, or in a Marxist sense.” It was mentioned that this was changing, however, and that an anti-capitalist lens was becoming more noticeable within feminist organizing:

Class is entering analysis more. To practice liberal feminism [for the respondent, a form of feminism that does not centre class] in Egypt you have to be really committed to not seeing reality, especially class. It’s not that people are changing necessarily but reality is changing their opinions.

Finally, the rural/urban divide was also mentioned as a “missing intersection” and one that was very important to think about in the context of the region. As one respondent noted, “It’s important for us to ask, who among us will go and work in the countryside? If not, we need to acknowledge this contradiction.”

A final point here is related to temporality. One respondent brought up the notion that the intersections people focused on were sometimes those that emerged from their past and not their present: “When people talk about intersectionality, they talk about it in the past, not the present. They look at where they come from. But today who are you? Yes, you have a history of oppression, but what about your life today?” The example they gave here was that of income, and how someone’s income can change over time even though they may have grown up with a much lower income. Relatedly, they noted that often when it comes to intersections, people reveal the structures that are oppressive. They asked: “When are we going to talk about the intersectionality of privileges, and how things are not binary. You can still have intersectional oppression and privilege and they can exist in different degrees on a spectrum.” This connected to a point several respondents made about the tendency to valorize speech and see a verbal recognition of privilege as “enough.” These two points—that the way structures affect our privilege or oppression at different points in our lives matters and that intersectionality is also about the power we hold and not simply the oppression we face—are important ones to reflect on.

19.4 Coming together as feminists: the question of difference

The age-old question of how feminists approach the question of difference emerged as a strong theme across our interviews. In one interview with respondents from Western Sahara, they

described their experience within the feminist movement in the region as “coming from the margins to the margins,” a statement that was an invitation to acknowledge the difference in issues and realities present in North Africa and West Asia, where we tend to center the experiences of one or two countries as the experiences of everyone. They asked whether and how the feminist movement across the region was willing to engage in uncomfortable conversations around its own complicities and hierarchies and that although colonialism and colonial violence are important in local politics, there is also the question of power dynamics within the region and within communities. In discussing intersectionality or feminism, it remains important to center contexts and the particular power relations embedded within them, while also maintaining a global lens.

They continued:

We need to think about and examine travelling, not only in terms of a journey from the North to the South, but also within regional contexts, which carry their own hierarchies, power and politics, as well as access to funding and knowledge. This raises the question: why is it easier to connect our struggle to feminists from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and other places, while it is still a struggle to come together and discuss solidarity within our region?

They suggest that one way to begin this is to move away from “using intersectionality as an identity” and instead thinking of it as a “tool for a liberation agenda.” Here again we see an invitation to think of intersectionality as a tool in order to make it as useful as possible in different contexts. Another respondent mentioned the importance of finding ways of working with other groups who might not share the same identities and issues in relation to feminist activism, such as the Bidoun in Kuwait, workers, and undocumented migrants. Here other struggles might be more central, yet there is a shared belief in liberation.

We have been training for so long to learn how to centre ourselves that maybe we don't know how to not centre ourselves. What does this process of un-centring look like? How does it help us connect with different issues and identities, and look at different power struggles in the region and around the world?

Through these reflections, the question of what solidarity means in a region that is made up of many layered forms of inequality is being explored.

The question of uncentering echoed in another interview with a young feminist who has been working on intersectional knowledge production in Egypt for over ten years. She reflected on how important it was to center the identities of queer, trans, Black, working-class women (among others) ten years ago, but that looking back it now feels as though they were “stuck” in the “personal identity lens” which contributed to failing to address systems of power, and to a lack of vision as to how to expand the conversation and engage with the world outside of the “self.” She also noted that despite finding the critique of Western knowledge production important, she also found that there were failings within the Egyptian feminist movement in terms of connecting with feminist movements across the Global South, especially those with similar struggles. This echoes the focus on transnational feminism which came up in many of our interviews, often ending with the suggestion, as one participant put it, that we should “bring back third world feminism.”

A final dimension in this section on difference is that of generation. When we began thinking about this piece, we knew that it would be important to include generation in our discussions

of feminism. There have been discussions around the complexities of connections and disconnections between feminists across generations, especially in terms of the differences on particular topics. These discussions emerged especially following the passing of prominent Egyptian feminist and writer Nawal el Saadawi. As one respondent suggested, it's important we look at Nawal el Saadawi on a timeline, thinking about how their writing changed over time. They did extremely important work, even if their positions on questions of trans rights, sex work, and rights to the body were not positions that are popular today among feminists. This approach—to think of the complexity and contradictions embedded within older generations of feminists—is one we would like to push for. As one respondent said at the start of their reflections, in many ways feminists of previous generations were “braver than us” and “did much more than we have.”

Another element of this topic was the ways in which younger women today are exposed to intersectionality much earlier than women in other generations. As one respondent noted, this is often through social media: “I was in a completely different place when I was 18. To me, it's very positive that younger people are exposed to intersectionality at a much younger age.” At the same time, it was noted that younger generations of feminists were experiencing a different form of transnationalism or internationalism, where there were fewer global connections (or so it seemed). One respondent noted that we need to think more about how we can open up more discussions with feminists in other parts of the world, a sentiment that we can also apply to think across different generations and temporalities.

19.5 Concluding thoughts

Through this chapter, we have explored the different attachments and theorizations around intersectionality that various feminists across North Africa and West Asia are grappling with. Throughout these reflections, we see that there is an ambiguity in relation to intersectionality that grapples with both what it has made possible and its lasting importance, as well as the problems that have emerged from how it has traveled and how this is related to questions of knowledge production and power at a global level. We want to especially highlight the recurrent points and thoughts around what it means to produce knowledge in and for a Global South context; how to continue the work of contextualizing histories of violence within North Africa and West Asia, especially in relation to race, religion, and migration; and how we might think more deeply about the role of capitalism and anti-capitalism in feminist organizing. Most importantly, we want to underline the feeling of ambiguity that threaded through almost every single conversation, a sentiment that makes clear-cut conclusions about the fate of intersectionality difficult to come to. Perhaps one thing to consider more carefully is how we might think of feminist theorizing, consciousness, and action as always ambiguous, given the ever-changing contours of our political, economic, social, and intimate worlds.

Notes

- 1 See: Bilge, S., 2013. Intersectionality Undone: Saving intersectionality from feminist intersectionality studies. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 10(2): 405–24; Carbado, D.W., 2013. Colorblind intersectionality. *Signs* 38(4): 811–45; Carbin, M. and Edenheim, S., 2013. The intersectional turn in feminist theory: A dream of a common language? *European Journal of Women's Studies* 20(3): 233–48; Cho, S., Crenshaw, K., and McCall, L., 2013. Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs* 38(4): 785–810; Crenshaw, K., 1991. Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241–99; Lewis, G., 2009. Celebrating intersectionality? Debates on a multi-faceted concept in gender studies: Themes from a conference. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 16(3): 203–10; Nash, J. C., 2018. *Black Feminism*

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- 2 Bilge 2013.
 - 3 Nash 2018.
 - 4 Said, E., 1983. Traveling theory. In: *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 226–47; Said, E., 2001. Traveling theory reconsidered. In: *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*. London: Granta Books, 436–52.
 - 5 Mohanty, C., 1988. Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review* 30(1): 61–88; Alexander, M. J. and Mohanty, C. T., eds., 2013. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York: Routledge; Mohanty, C. T., 2003. *Feminism without Borders*. Durham: Duke University Press.

EXPLORING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE STREET AND THE CLASSROOM IN MOVING THROUGH FEMINIST IMPASSES

Meena Gopal and Sangita Thosar¹

This chapter attempts to engage with a lingering impasse in feminist politics in India surrounding women's lives at the intersections of caste, sexuality, and labor by exploring the possibilities of feminists from diverse locations engaging with the impasse. The issues around the sexual labor of women have been a matter over which feminists from diverse locations in the women's movement have faced, at times, insurmountable hurdles toward forging a common politics. Among the diverse sites that have engaged with this contention has also been the women's studies classroom and its space within the academy. This chapter will explore the small steps and tentative hand-locking that have been possible not just to make space for conversation around sexual labor and sexual politics but also to understand how diverse standpoints offer interrogations from the margins that urge the center to turn self-reflexive.

20.1 The impasse

One of the many contentious issues that Indian feminists have had to confront and account for has been that of sexual labor. The constant recurrence of this debate with newer entrants engaging with the issue has been a source of unease but also considerable illumination of the lives of women at the margins, while also rendering hope for a politics of solidarity. We elucidate below one such instance in recent times with which both of us authors have engaged, participated in the discussions, understood the several positions of feminists, learned from one another, and continue to do so.

In March 2005, the government of the state of Maharashtra announced a ban on women performing in dance bars,² at first in the entire state and subsequently extended to the bars in the city of Mumbai. The government, through its Home Minister who was also the Deputy Chief Minister, cited the morally corrupting influence of the dance bars as the reason for the ban (*Times of India* 2005). Overnight, nearly 75,000 women who worked in the bars lost their self-sought livelihoods, and another major consequence was the dissonance among feminists and women's rights activists along the fault-lines of support for the government's ban for the reason that the women faced exploitation in the bars at the hands of the owners and clients,

and opposition to the ban arguing that elimination of these livelihoods was counter-productive and what was needed was protection from exploitation by improvement in the conditions of work along similar jobs within the larger informal economy.³ Complicating the intersections of sexuality and labor, the voices of Dalit-Bahujan⁴ feminists who expressed anger and hurt at the support offered to the bar dancers by a section of the women's movement pointed out that the gesture, even if for protecting livelihoods, was a reinforcement of caste-based occupations through which continued the exploitation of women of lower castes.

This is yet another instance of the discord over sexuality and labor, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has noted within the women's movement in India. Despite numerous voices evident within the spectrum of sexual labor, the bar dancers being one of the most recent, the Indian women's movement continues to view sexual labor in terms of prostitution, and in terms of the sexual exploitation of women. The entry of these numerous voices over the years has contributed to the prostitution question, that is, "the contemporary debates around women in prostitution, is fraught today because of the acute divide it has created among feminists and between feminists and sex workers, not to mention among others in the field, in India and elsewhere" (Sunder Rajan 2003, 117).

While the caste-based exploitation has a historical basis for its continuance, the voices of those who oppose it at present and try to organize themselves are drowned in the cacophony of the anti-trafficking discourse, state legislation to abolish caste-based practices, and the chorus of rehabilitation efforts of NGOs national and international. The opposition to sexual labor as caste-based exploitation finds resonance in anti-caste social movements of the 19th century in both the states of Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu where women who were engaged in cultural and sexual labor participated (Tambe 2008). Lessons from these historical struggles as well as the contemporary situation need to be assessed in order to challenge the persistent structural reason why women from largely Dalit and Bahujan communities continue to exist in sexual labor. Apart from these histories, in recent years there have also been accounts by Dalit feminists in the form of autobiographies and movement narratives, reflecting not just individual lives but the material realities of Dalit lives (Pawar 2008; Kamble 2008) focusing on the labors of women of lower castes and their community histories.

These interventions and subsequent assertions by Dalit feminists have led to reflections on the blind spots in the women's movements' trajectories. The contemporary women's movement in India, with autonomous feminist collectives (those that are distinct from organizations affiliated with political parties and mobilizations) forming a distinctive voice, has rallied around, campaigned, and struggled for justice for women from marginalized groups, be it Mathura, an Adivasi (tribal) woman, Bhanwari Devi, a Dalit woman, or Shah Bano, a Muslim woman. However, in all of this, the approach was to invoke the law, claim rights, and demand justice from the location of sisterhood and solidarity. The all-encompassing category of woman eluded the various other social locations that women are situated in, and how these structural hierarchies operate aggravating inequalities in their lives. Dalit-Bahujan feminists point to the lack of self-consciousness of the upper-caste, urban, middle-class women who come to represent the women's movement in India. It is this background and lack of engagement with caste and the oppression of Dalits, specifically Dalit women, or even an acknowledgment of Dalit women's social location that was responsible for this blind spot of castelessness. The ubiquitous and everyday violence that Dalit women face in India is a reflection of the embeddedness of caste-patriarchy. Upper-caste women are often spared this routine humiliation and violence. Therefore, a meaningful feminist politics and an engagement with caste can emerge by listening to Dalit voices and movements for Dalit rights and recognizing the misperception that anti-caste politics rest only on the shoulders of Dalits.

20.2 Attempts at conversation

The differences that emerged among feminists over the bar dancers' controversy were not to be abandoned, especially at a juncture when capitalist patriarchy was gaining ascendance within the larger political-economic realm with the divisive forces of caste, religion, and ethnicity being whipped up in good measure. The dance bar impasse had almost foreclosed any dialogue among the Dalit and non-Dalit feminists who occupied their diverse positions. This was further complicated by the inattention and silence by non-Dalit groups around the brutal lynching and killing of a Dalit family of a mother, daughter, and two sons in September 2006 in the village of Khairlanji, near the city of Nagpur in Eastern Maharashtra. The specter of sexual violation of Dalit bodies amplified the anger and hurt of Dalits in Maharashtra. It seemed to have been a moment that was lost, to stand in support of Dalit activists and condemn the violence! Trust and solidarity had to be built, and to this end, autonomous feminists initiated two meetings in Mumbai to have a dialogue on issues of caste and gender/sexuality in February and May 2009.⁵ The first of these meetings was organized in Mumbai, where city-based activists and groups came together while the second extended to a few groups across the state of Maharashtra. As the authors of this chapter, our paths crossed at this moment of dialogue among feminists, nearly a decade ago. While Meena was a participant in both the dialogues as part of the autonomous feminist collective, Forum Against Oppression of Women, in Mumbai, Sangita joined the second meeting as a participant from an anti-caste collective, Satyashodak (Truthseekers) Student Organization, from the city of Pune in Western Maharashtra.

These meetings between Dalit and non-Dalit feminists were a conversation across bridges, but focused on contemporary challenges of religious fundamentalism and patriarchy challenging feminist organizing; on hierarchies among caste groups, internal differences, and identities; on lesbian and queer feminisms that the older Dalit feminists were not familiar with; and finally the question of sex workers and the women in the dance bars. What was reiterated in the conversations was the fissures created by fundamentalist forces in the solidarity that could be forged between Dalit and non-Dalit feminists, the unending violence and atrocities against Dalits and minority communities, and the lack of engagement with caste in several progressive movements. There was strong worry about the leaning of several sections such as OBCs (other backward classes), Dalits, and middle classes toward Hindu traditions. Religious practices and rituals seemed to preoccupy public institutions such as education and public administration. There was also vigorous campaigning by right-wing forces among Dalits and OBC communities. While there were calls for alliance building in the future, there was also a deep sense of alienation of the Dalit feminists who were protesting about the Khairlanji massacre which remained unseen by non-Dalit feminists; even the media reporting on violence against Dalit women carried this bias of muting the reality of targeted oppression of Dalits. One of the assurances that the non-Dalit feminists had spelled out at the meeting in paving the way toward alliance building was to extend support, host meetings and workshops, follow up on incidents of such violence, and participate in investigations. An interesting angle to the discussions was initiated through queer feminists who unpacked the heteronormative foundations of discussions on sexual politics and flagged moments in the queer movement against decriminalization which Dalit feminists were a bit removed from. But this conversation slowly opened that path toward discussions on sexual labor.

This politics of a dialogue resonates with Nira Yuval-Davis's (2006) discussion of a transversal politics that builds from the efforts that Black, Hispanic, and some European feminists have attempted. Taking off from feminist standpoint epistemology, transversal politics acknowledge difference amongst individuals and groups, but aspirations for democracy and equality are also

sustained. Participants in this dialogue adopt reflexivity but also consider the position of others in the dialogue based on hopefulness and trust. But the foundation of the dialogue is the attention to the specific positions and identities of those who participate in them as well as to the unfinished knowledge that each situated positioning can offer. This indeed was where the gap was as far as the non-Dalit feminists were concerned. The knowledge gap can only be fulfilled by sustained conversations across differences. However, caution was a prerequisite to be aware that such dialogue was not without boundaries. Further not every conflict or contradiction was reconcilable. But sustained feminist politics could evolve into communities of knowledge-making, formed across differences in situations and identities.

The situation of the women who worked in the dance bars remained largely scattered, even as their legal struggles that had successfully culminated in the Bombay High Court, moved to the Supreme Court with the state of Maharashtra seeking a stay on the Bombay High Court's verdict of restoring the women their livelihoods. In the Supreme Court as well the case languished with the final resolution in 2013.

Following up on one of the crucial realizations of contemporary politics that confront social movements of all hues, the onslaught of majoritarian Hindutva politics indifferent to the rights violation of minorities especially based on caste and religion, those who participated in the 2009 dialogue joined a feminist alliance that sought to challenge this. On March 10, 2017, they joined thousands of women, Adivasis, Dalits, Muslims, differently abled, sex workers, and LGBTKHQI⁶ persons who gathered in the city of Nagpur in Central Maharashtra, under the slogan Chalo Nagpur (March to Nagpur) to commemorate the 120th death anniversary of Savitribai Phule, who was from the Dalit-Bahujan communities and considered the first woman teacher of Maharashtra (Ratnam 2018; *The Wire* 2018). Nagpur was decided as the place to gather in solidarity due to it being the venue of the largest women's conference organized by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the Dalit icon, under the banner of the Scheduled Caste Federation. The preparations and conversations among the organizers had been ongoing for a few months, with the motivation to build solidarity among participants from different locations. Newer entrants such as queer activists and sexual minorities such as sex workers were welcomed even as there were some qualms expressed, some of which were reminiscent of earlier disagreements. However, there was no unwelcome gesture.

At the conference itself, there were speeches, songs, and performances that expressed solidarity and challenged dominant forces. A Dalit feminist and scholar of women's studies acknowledged the historic gathering of women across differences, as an attempt at collective struggle toward building connections, and dialogue for an equal world. Underlining the struggles of several women against Brahmanical ideology and Hindutva, they reiterated the resolve on behalf of everybody to fight against caste patriarchy. However, recalling the persistent feminist objection around the prostitution question, there were both direct and veiled references to portray sex workers as victims of violence, and those non-Dalit women who support the organizations of sex workers as perpetrators of that violence (Ramesh 2017). Other activists and social workers were candid about the fact that more conversations were necessary with those expressing different sexual identities, sexual minorities, and sex workers. They acknowledged the lack of knowledge of people emerging from diverse sexual identities due to the strong association of heterosexual identity to caste purity, where the burden of sexual purity rests on the bodies of women (Dhawan and Pradeep 2017). They viewed this space as an opportunity for conversations across sexual differences, due to the participation of lesbian women, trans persons, and sex workers at the conference.

The participation of queer people and sexual minorities had surely opened up this space of dialogue in comparison to the earlier attempt at dialogue. Additionally, it also indicated the mul-

tiple, even contradictory perceptions even amongst Dalit feminists. The reminder of the essence of a dialogue advancing transversal politics, of building on the solidarities and putting aside the irreconcilables, was a lesson at this moment. The potential of spaces of dialogue expanding and moving to newer venues, bringing in a new generation of participants taking ahead the conversations dialectically now seemed a promising possibility. In the next two sections of this essay, the authors briefly adopt positions as interlocutors in this debate sharing their experience of transversal politics within the academy.

20.3 Self-reflexivity within the academy

Observations on the practice of women's studies in the context of the US university prompted us to reflect on our location. Although not entirely comparable, two impulses—those of precarity and legitimacy—have resonance here as well. In addition, the liminal space of the feminist classroom helps in providing a stage for producing encounters of a different kind when teachers and students engage with one another (Nash and Owens 2015). We see our location here as an opportunity to discuss some of the troubled debates that emerged from the feminisms of the street and the public. As feminists who were participants in diverse movement spaces, in prior dialogue, we found ourselves in this new location grappling initially with the exigencies of women's studies within higher education. Although it was the women's movement and feminists outside the academy that set rolling the process of creation and generation of knowledge challenging patriarchy, the new crucible for the production of knowledge around women to be set up within the university system in India was a step taken by the state. It was the state that took up the task of institutionalizing women's studies within the academy following feminist incursions into higher education, through the University Grants Commission the apex funding body supporting women's studies centers, programs, and cells in universities and colleges across India since the late 1980s. Feminist scholars located within conventional disciplines in the university's diverse departments and colleges have a longer history of contributing to scholarship on gender (Chakravarti 1993; Banerjee 1989). Indian feminism has also a thick bunch of scholars who self-identify as academics and activists (Sangari and Vaid 1989), sometimes hyphenated, sometimes not. Despite this, the aspiration due to its location within the university is for scholars to shirk themselves free of the taint of activism.

Given the mixed histories of women's studies centers (WSCs) in India and their reliance on state funding to continue to survive within the university system, and proving themselves eligible for support based on the scholarship generated and their contribution to the production of students, the WSCs are in somewhat of a crisis (Bhuyan 2019; *Hindustan Times* 2017). Despite this situation of the WSCs within universities, the field itself is gaining privilege and status within interdisciplinary social sciences and the humanities (John 2008). It is at this juncture of crisis and advantage that our location within a specific women's studies center prompts us to reflect on our location and its dynamics. The challenges were not just related to the academic substance of our profession, but also the context where higher education is constantly prompted to respond to both its relevance for a nationalist agenda as much as a global economic vision. Social movements too looked to WSCs to highlight the realities of women's lives at the margins, such as in the case of the bar dancers.

These challenges of the academy resounded with what the women's movement and other social movements faced in the neoliberal and Hindutva contexts. Although the tenor of the academy was toward competition and demonstration of competence, our specific location urged us to also focus on the ethics and politics of collective action. The intimate connection of WSCs to the women's movement and coalitions with other movements impel us to respond to the

concerns of feminism and be warned that the academic work not be carried away by competitive and commercial trends usually prevalent in elite academies of the West and India to some extent. We believe our experience of this intersection is significant for women's/feminist studies ensconcing itself in higher education in India but also for engaged activism. Needless to say that this is also enabled by being at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), a unique institution with a long history of producing social work professionals (Desai 1991). There is much to be spoken and discussed about the diverse strands of our engagement within institutionalized feminism or women's studies in the Indian academy also given that both of us come from diverse universes, but we will focus here on how our different trajectories through activism and feminist scholarship lead us to engage with one such strand of caste and sexuality within the space of the institution.

Engendering the caste embodiment right into the metropolitan university, generations of teachers and students in TISS productively worked the affirmative-action wheel with enabling measures to support students from Dalit and backward communities to seek admission to TISS. Their efforts pushed the administration to organize workshops to orient and train these student applicants to perform successfully in the TISS admission process. For instance, it is the efforts of employees, teachers, and students from Dalit and Adivasi communities who not only advocated the writings and thought of Dr. Ambedkar but initiated the Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Lectures from 2003 on campus. Not just at the institutional level, students from these disadvantaged communities also formed networks to pave the way for entry for young people from their villages and towns in far-flung areas of Maharashtra, mentoring them to apply to the various courses and programs, as well as providing support. One of the key ways of doing this was to help those who have financial difficulties be offered support in payment of fees from those who held scholarships. This yielded fantastic results that were evident in the growing student body that also later represented itself in student organizations forefronting the caste and class experience of marginality to make the system respond adequately.

In 2016, the TISS campus along with several others across the country was churned by student mobilizations following the death by suicide of Rohith Vemula,⁷ a Ph.D. scholar at a premier university. This made possible a foregrounding of the caste experience for the first time in years within university spaces, challenging even the newly formed, right-wing government at the center. The backdrop of the neoliberal economy was also rearing its head. Dalit-Bahujan student protests spearheaded this challenge highlighting not just the state's shearing of student stipends and scholarships and slashing of funds for subsidized hostels and boarding, but pointing to the intense caste-based discrimination prevalent in higher education witnessed by the spate of deaths-by-suicides which were rightly termed institutional murders. The radical politics of the students influenced us teachers as well, and as feminists, our efforts at bringing caste patriarchy into our interrogations were further strengthened.

As academic activists, we initiated and invited activists from grassroots organizations as panelists and speakers, who spoke of the struggle of Dalit women for citizenship rights such as housing and water supply, which was integrated into the theoretical discussions within the classroom. Further, we participated in the protest march against the Kharda Dalit atrocity⁸ and also participated in discussions related to caste violence organized by various social movements. Thus support for campaigns as well as lecture discussions on the manifestations of caste in the everyday was a feature that brought everyone onto the platform of solidarity. Another set of involvement was around the campaigns to decriminalize queer lives. Student and faculty participation was more than forthcoming in supporting LGBTKHQI rights. Student activism on campus that gained momentum, following the Supreme Court finally reading down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 2018, led the TISS administration to institute one of

the gender-segregated hostels for students as gender neutral, a first ever in university history (Sahoo 2018).

20.4 The potential of students and teachers conversing in the WS space

Amidst this fertile space of multiple upsurges of political voices, we sought to learn and expand our conversations. The women's studies classrooms of master's and research students are a vibrant and intersectional space representing all diversities and regions of India. We have seen the incremental presence of students from all social locations over the years. One of the biggest pedagogical lessons has been transcending the linguistic and caste barrier. It is almost a given that privileged caste, class, and urban location are a sure ticket to English-language schooling in India. The TISS classroom and the affirmative-action policy require us teachers to be alert and transform ourselves to be sensitive to the student from a marginal location and her struggles. The empowered among them request teachers to switch to the bilingual mode of teaching using Hindi, the language used in many northern states of India, along with English used more officially in the southern and northeastern states. Regional and village stories and anecdotes of caste-patriarchal lives pepper the classroom dynamics. Students bring interesting, often confounding, and painful experiences from their lives, through stories, narratives, and films, into the classroom as well as other student initiatives to enhance the teaching-learning experience. Not all such interactions are pleasant and regenerative given the diversity and inequality among all actors; the usual amount of friction and tensions are also the ways we trudge along our teaching and politics. When a scholar was invited to speak on *lavani*⁹ as an art form in the contemporary globalized context, this drew sharp reactions from Dalit feminist colleagues who objected to what they saw as a "celebratory" representation of the erotic art shorn of its material location and the condition of its artistes.

In tandem with discussions on caste, articulations by a new crop of students who identified as queer and trans,^{*} whose embodied experiences were evident in the classroom but also in discussions within the campus, sparked a new sensibility and acceptance of gender and sexual non-conformity. Choice of research topics, as well as campus campaigns, brought out discussions on a wide range of issues such as homonationalism, the sexuality of persons with disability, queering sex education, and so on. Some of these challenged the heteronormative boundedness of the caste experience as well. With respect to sexuality, caste, and labor, the discomforts of the movement spaces began to reflect here as well. While students could afford to skirt around these issues through explorations into caste violence or caste-based occupations in their research projects, it was the platforms of invited talks or teacher discussions that became contentious, especially over the differences among the anti-caste groups and independent feminist groups over the issue of sex work and dance bar ban. It even led to tension-filled interactions among colleagues.

As an anti-caste activist, Sangita notes that she was firm in her opinion as an anti-caste activist and Dalit feminist that dancing in public and prostitution are a reinforcement of caste-based occupations that subjugate those caste groups that are traditionally found in such occupations. While retaining the understanding that work in the dance bars and prostitution are caste-based occupations, the knowledge of multiple feminist standpoints on this issue was useful in the context of the struggle for dignity and rehabilitation of women involved in these occupations. Meena noticed that within the space of the women's studies classroom, Sangita's approach was quite different from Dalit feminists who were located within movement spaces. She believes that Sangita's openness to conversations while being rooted in her own convictions with respect to caste-based occupations was reflected in her gradually emerging sensitivity to the voices of women who worked in the dance bars or were sex workers. Sangita believes that her introduc-

tion to discussions on queer lives brought in the need to unpack the performativity of sexual relations and its connection to the caste-patriarchal social system. In this, she recognized the importance of the transgender standpoint in the context of anti-caste praxis, a challenge to an otherwise masculinist Dalit perspective. With respect to the bar dancers, Sangita felt that there were many aspects to this question. For instance, some young women took up dance-bar work in order to express themselves through dance. She began to view their right over their own bodies, their desires, and their freedom to choose what occupation they wished to take up. Further, rather than leaving women to their own devices or refusing to take up their cause, if we considered their situation through a discourse on labor, the state could be forced to make provisions for these marginalized and exploited groups of women. The conversations helped recognize the agency of other women just as ours, although as a Dalit activist this was a big shift from a single axis to seeing the intersections of caste and dominant patriarchal institutions such as the police, judiciary, and the ruling class. Meena had initially felt that this chasm between Dalit and non-Dalit feminists, like herself, was difficult to overcome, but conversations have proven our ignorance about the many things that we had taken for granted. Intense debates ensued during lectures and talks on the dominance of upper-caste feminists such as herself over the intellectual terrain that Dalit feminists were carving for themselves. As upper-caste academics and activists, she felt there was so much more to know about Dalit lives and it was only by engaged listening to the words, writings, and speech of Dalit feminist colleagues that there could be authentic participation in critical knowledge generation of invisibilized lives. One such instance was a study on the conditions of work of Safai Karmacharis (cleaning/sanitary workers) engaged in sewerage cleaning operations that was commissioned by the Mumbai Municipal Corporation to our WSC. In the course of the research study, Meena realized that when she adopted the posture of an engaged listener to her Dalit colleagues whose authority over the subject was not just as researchers but being part of activist communities, new perspectives led to deeper understanding. Another point of departure was the deep attachment to family and household among Dalit feminists that seemed alien to someone like her for whom the autonomous feminist and queer collectives were a home away from home. So too were the moving descriptions that someone like Sangita had of her mother's cooking and preparation of beef with all the minimum that her household could afford, yet being the most delicious cuisine that they had had as children. These discussions were poignant everyday evocations of Dalit lives, at a time when India is being rocked by right-wing vigilantism and lynchings over cow politics and beef bans targeting Muslim and Dalit communities. Such an engagement with Dalit feminist questions, the political spaces, and conversations creating solidarity and trust were the steps that those of us in the movements attempted (and continue to attempt).

20.5 In lieu of a conclusion

Amidst intense challenge from the state and conservative forces in India, one could agree that there is an emerging politics of intersectional alliance in India that knits anti-caste, anti-patriarchal, anti-communal (religious fundamentalist), and anti-homophobic/transphobic politics. And this is not just in the legal realm but moves from the streets to the classroom and vice-versa.

The specific narrative that we have tried to encapsulate here attempts a collaboration where our different and uneven histories seek to come together to create a distinct universe within women's studies in higher education that keeps its deep connection to our politics within movement spaces.

While we derive tremendous sustenance from our lives that continue to be immersed in movements, we most of all believe that women's studies spaces can be nurtured to address

impasse by taking ahead conversations. We can also say that it is through affirmative action which has enhanced diversity and complexity among our student and teacher constituencies that multiple voices have engaged with the caste and sexual labor impasse. Suffice it to say that this very space also paves the way for dialogue and conversations.

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Notes

- 1 Sangita Thosar is Assistant Professor and Meena Gopal is Professor respectively at the Advanced Centre for Women's Studies, School of Development Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai.
- 2 Dance bars are bars that serve liquor with women who perform to Bollywood film music serving as entertainment to attract clients.
- 3 The discussion in this section draws on the arguments developed in Meena Gopal, "Caste, Sexuality and Labour: the Troubled Connection," *Current Sociology*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2012), 222–38.
- 4 Dalit-Bahujan refer to the historically oppressed groups in society, comprising the former "untouchable" castes and backward castes respectively. The combined reference to "Dalit-Bahujan" foregrounds caste as a structure of oppression intersecting with other social categories.
- 5 For detailed discussion, see Gopal 2012.
- 6 The LGBTKHQI alphabet soup denotes the categories of sexual and gender minorities in India, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, *kothi*, *hijra*, queer, and intersex.
- 7 In January 2016, the death-by-suicide of Rohith Vemula, a young Ph.D. scholar in the Central University of Hyderabad in Telangana, India, triggered nationwide student protests over caste-based discrimination that rocked university campuses and spurred social movements.
- 8 In 2014, 17-year-old Dalit student Nitin Aage was killed in broad daylight in Kharda village of Jamkhed *taluka* of Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra, and his body brutalized by men from the upper-caste Maratha community, who suspected him of having a love affair with a girl related to them (see Teltumbde 2014).
- 9 *Lavani* is a folk song performed through gestures in the Tamasha folk theater, a local form of performance in Maharashtra.

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FROM TRAVEL TO ARRIVAL

Mapping intersectionality's
landings in the Global South*Srila Roy*

Concepts do not enter an empty unmarked conceptual space. They have to affect the operation of established practices and their implicit conceptual structures.

—*Sudipta Kaviraj, Filth and the Public Sphere, 1997*

We know that concepts travel, but where do they land? As the subaltern studies scholar, Sudipta Kaviraj, reminds us, concepts do not enter “an empty unmarked conceptual space.” In writing also on the arrival of modernity in the colony, Dipesh Chakrabarty shows that no concept can simply or universally be “applied” to another context, as “no human society is a tabula rasa,” and “our historical differences actually make a difference” (2000). The travel of concepts is never about the simple transference of a cultural or political idea from one milieu to another, but always also “a process of translation of diverse life-worlds and conceptual horizons about being human” (2000).

Such claims—as with wider ones around cultural transference, translation and travel—help me think about the density of the local into which concepts arrive; or of their landing upon conjunctures that are thick with existing political literacies, archives of thought and action, conceptual imaginaries and horizons, and affective ties, on which newer conceptual maps might draw and which, in turn, they inevitably inflect, even shift. What exists is hardly erased, just as what arrives takes a specific shape, as it layers upon or even melds into specific conditions and cultural forms. Anxieties around intersectionality’s origins and travel have produced limited and less nuanced accounts of where intersectionality lands.¹ When it comes to the Global South, in particular, a lack of nuance can reproduce dominant perceptions of these locales as being typically empty or passive, as amenable only to epistemic imposition from the outside.

I use the occasion of this contribution to briefly reflect on intersectionality’s travel to two distinct sites in the Global South, where it has been enthusiastically taken up by academics and activists (especially feminists and queer feminists). Queer feminist activists in India have turned to a more consciously intersectional language around gender, sexuality, and rights in recent years, even as their political models and rhetoric articulated a proto-intersectional sensibility well before. However articulated, activist commitments to intersectionality folded into highly local attachments to the “subaltern,” borne out of convergent leftist and feminist imaginations (which were especially intense and enduring in the formerly communist state of West Bengal).

In South Africa, by contrast, “intersectionality” arrived at the high point of the student movement against university fees and was able to give voice and meaning to deeply felt experiences of gender-based violence, homophobia, and toxic masculinity. Intersectionality worked to reorient activist energies toward the injury of gendered and queer subjects, taking away, for some, investments in questions of class and economic (in)justice.

I am less interested in mapping these sites for the conceptual or activist inadequacies that they might reveal; rather, for what they tell us about the particular political conjunctures into which concepts enter, and the work of translation that is undertaken “to make ideas work in different context” (Crenshaw 2011). The different take-up of intersectionality with distinct effects suggests something about the conditions under which specific intersections take hold of public or at least activist imaginations, revealing the multiple temporalities contained within a specific conjuncture. In both locales, “intersectionality” acted as a vehicle to recraft inherited political grammars, as well as to craft new ones, offering “backward” forms of politics (Love 2007), or ones that led “back to the future” (Gillespie and Naidoo 2019).

21.1 Queer feminisms in India: proto-intersectional logics and practices

As queerness gained public visibility and social acceptance—even as it remained criminalized—questions around intersectionality grew prominent amongst queer rights activists in India. In the period in which the Indian courts removed and reinstated laws against sodomy—and new markets and media celebrating queer life emerged—activists worried whether these “new” queer futures could only be envisioned in normative, homonationalist, and capitalist terms. But well before this period, a group of queer feminist activists in Kolkata turned to lobby a wider population in their struggle for decriminalization and destigmatization and to move beyond a politics centered around sexual identification alone to a proto-intersectional one.

With origins in a small support group for LBT women called Sappho, they formed an externally funded, rights-based organization called Sappho for Equality or SFE. They described the journey from Sappho to SFE as one reflecting a shift from identity politics to issue-based activism, informed by a lesbian standpoint. In the words of founder members, Akanksha and Malobika (2007, 367):

we started to visualize our issues from the human rights perspective ... While registering as a trust/public body, we took on the new name Sappho for Equality indicating our mission to work on a boarder frame with marginalized women, starting with marginalization on sexual preference. Anyone who supports our cause can join this, irrespective of gender and sexual orientation.

The model of the activist platform—to which all, irrespective of sexual identification or choice, could belong—was not unknown to Indian queer activists, both as a way of critiquing Western, single-issue, identity-centered LGBT politics, as well as embodying a more intersectional one that attached sexuality to other categories of power and powerlessness specific to the Indian context. One set of Indian queer feminist activists in Delhi explained their shift from “an identity-based paradigm of sexual minorities to an intersectional framework, which sought to locate sexuality—in a dynamic and holistic way—in relation to other axes of social construction and control, such as gender, religion, and class” (Sharma and Nath 2005, 87). They were referring to the Delhi-based activist platform, PRISM, whose everyday strategy Naisargi Dave (2012) describes as being concerned with “the intersectionality of oppressions, particularly those of sexuality and class.”

While early SFE members did not use the language of intersectionality, their drive to move beyond identitarian articulations of sexuality to question, on behalf of everyone (queer and non-queer), “the assumptions of ‘mainstream’ sexual practices and norms” (Ghosh 2016) reflected a proto-intersectional logic. In explicit terms, though, the organization employed the language of universal human rights that provided impetus and direction to early Indian queer feminist organizing (see Dave 2012). Activist slogans moved from additive models—“Prothome ami manush, tarpor ami meyemanush, shob sheshe ami shomokami meyemanush” (I am first a human, and then a woman, and only last am I a lesbian woman) —to the insertion of lesbian needs to existing rights discourses—“lesbian rights are human rights.” Needless to say, these rhetorical shifts were fundamentally transnational in nature, with concrete material consequences. Unlike comparable platforms like PRISM which eschewed external funds, SFE was funded by international donors. Funding support from international organizations working on “lesbian rights as human rights” were critical to the sustainability of lesbian activism, which was not only criminalized by the Indian state but also fell outside of the new regimes of risk, visibility, and support that the HIV/AIDS crisis had generated in the Global South. As an NGO, SFE worked on three fronts: it sought to “empower” community members, engage in robust advocacy work (which included building its own set of publications and a queer archive), and sensitize state representations and organizations. Sappho continued as a “safe space” where LBT persons (mostly cisgendered women) could meet for the purposes of accessing community and “emotional support.” These were mostly individuals “of means” (Dave 2012), not elite but solidly middle-class and metropolitan.

Looking back on the early years of an organization that emerged as the face of the queer movement in eastern India, core members reflected on a proto-intersectional politics:

Issues like livelihood, class, caste, disability, regionality and political/racial/religious marginalisations did come into discussions and in solidarity-building efforts with other movements, but not so much directly in our political consciousness. Intersectionality, not then a buzzword as today, came in the form of matching footsteps with other movements, raising voices in each other’s support and reacting in solidarity to crises.

(Biswas, Beethi, and Ghosh 2019)

This was one of the ways in which intersectionality resonated with this group of queer feminists, as a way of building alliances and solidarity with other movements. The intersectionalities of struggle were rooted in an understanding of the intersectional nature of identity itself, as a founder member, Akanksha wrote: “we are trying to connect the gender-sexuality rights movement with other movements against marginalisation on the basis of markers like caste, class, religion, occupation, geographical location, education—to understand our own identities through the lens of intersectionalities between multiple marginalisations” (Ghosh 2016). For Akanksha, individual lives were comprised of some mainstream (or privileged) and some marginal positions, best captured by “intersectionality,” from which movement organizing could emanate. Finally and perhaps most importantly, intersectionality enabled a firmer articulation of what was always known, namely, that sexuality could not be understood outside of its intersections with class, caste, religion, and location. Individual activists often reached for the example of the “Muslim hijra” or the “Marwari lesbian” as ways of explaining the specific intersections of gender-variant and sexual minority experiences with religion and community in India. This easy recourse to religion and community suggests a specifically postcolonial understanding of queerness and queer struggles.²

One way of mapping changes in conceptual and political horizons is available in the bilingual newsletter that SFE published. A 2016 issue was devoted to the concept of intersectionality, with a lead article by a Delhi-based activist identifying the newsletter—published in English and Bangla—as itself an intersectional act. Acknowledging how urban-based and even elite the mainstream queer movement in India was, the author saw SFE’s efforts to publish in the vernacular (and not the newsletter alone) as extending the otherwise metropolitan scale of queer activism, to non-English speaking and potentially non-urban publics.

SFE was deeply reflective of its own metropolitan limits and biases, and the specific intersections of gender and sexuality with class came to most occupy and direct activist imaginations and agendas. Above all, they directed metropolitan queer activism towards the needs and desires of the subaltern lesbian of rural Bengal—or, the *gramer meye*, a figure with great symbolic meaning in postcolonial feminist and leftist imaginaries. Such a figure tended to be invoked more as a metaphor—of hope and failure—than as a fleshy material being (as Jen Nash remarks of Asian and Black women in US “transnational” and “intersectional” women’s studies; Nash 2015). The *gramer meye* shaped activist investments in particular intersections, over others, and produced a politics that “felt backward” (Love 2007).³ In order to assuage their class and metrocentric limits and establish a more intersectional praxis, queer feminists turned to a “pure” subaltern subject, as made available by political projects, past and enduring.

21.2 The ghosts of the past and the paradoxes of the present

“Intersectionality” did not stop queer feminist activists from prioritizing class dynamics, implicitly reproducing their primacy over other structures and relations of power. These logics had specific—and highly local—histories and lineages, which one could easily trace to Kolkata’s leftist political “field,” as shaping the directions of a regional women’s movement but also informing the self-understanding of a more national one (Ray 1999). Even as queer feminisms had troubled origins in the women’s movement—which activists experienced as homophobic and as offering them only conditional acceptance—they also embodied many of its political vocabularies and affective terms, several derived from the left. For organizations like SFE, for whom global neoliberal circuits of funding and capital had transformed the imaginative and material scope of their activism, a recourse to available conceptual maps and political models helped negotiate the risks and tensions—and opportunities—of the neoliberal conjuncture. This was the terrain upon which individual activists embraced proto-intersectional perspectives. They also constituted the conditions under which the “margin of the margins” (Ghosh 2016, 50) came to stand in, above all, for the non-urban poor, and folded into existing tropes of saving subaltern others.

From the start and in ways that intensified with organizational expansion, SFE had clear aspirations and anxieties around the reach of their activism. “Is our activism city-centric? Does it have no sway in rural areas?” they asked in their newsletter, *Swakanthey*, and went on to illustrate in a January 2012 editorial how their movement moved from cities to villages:

On 4th December, on the occasion of [the] anti-violence fortnight for women, we headed out with our leaflets to local trains running towards villages, where we directly talked to the daily passengers who come to the city to earn and go back every day. Our purpose, through these passengers, sending our messages ... that we, your urban friends, are by you! Perhaps as a result of it, a village girl from close to the Sunderbans stands at our door, with her same-sex lover.

(Ghosh 2016, 33)

Campaigns such as distributing leaflets on local commuter trains that connected the city of Kolkata to its peri-urban and rural fringes were geared toward advocacy and consciousness-raising efforts in non-metropolitan areas, amongst those queers who were less privileged in class, caste, and locational terms. Such initiatives were undertaken in the name of women's rights, violence against women, and reaching the grassroots. They suggested how international funds and donor-speak had extended activist (out)reach, beyond the metropole, while the constructs of the rural and the grassroots as key sites of need, risk, and vulnerability were handy in attracting such funds. But they also evoked "older" political sensibilities, which were both leftist and feminist, and intensely felt in the specific feminist field that SFE occupied.

If the train campaign extended the literal reach of activists, other initiatives ensured that those outside of the metropolitan had a safe space to arrive at. Recall that SFE maintained a support group for addressing the needs of "other" same-sex desiring women. For many members, the support group was vital for outreach to those who lived beyond the urban and the cosmopolitan. Researcher and SFE member Niharika Banerjea (2014, 8) quotes Neena, a fellow member, expressing such sentiments:

Suppose a girl who comes to know about Sappho for the first time or comes to Sappho for the first time, think of her world!! A girl from an interior village or suburb, she does not get to see two girls roaming around! She does not know about *this life!* Maybe, she heard about Sappho and came here. Think of her fears and palpitations! So many thoughts are there embedded in her mind! That she is something different, that she is guilty, that she is giving pain to her parents, she just does not know what to do with life! So much of societal pressure! When these girls come here, what do you do? You just want to give her some warmth! Like a person freezing in cold! ... Just as a person freezing in cold gets back the warmth within, when comes under a wrap! It is the same here. After a point of time, girls start feeling warm, stand up and face life in a different way.
(emphasis added)

Queer progress relied on a literal and symbolic journey from the rural, a space not conducive to same-sex livability, to the urban, the site of queer liberation and life itself. These kinds of metrocentric imaginaries, which were widely in circulation, posited specific kinds of relationships within the community, with the empowered metropolitan "queer" being posited as the savior of the vulnerable and victimized rural "lesbian."⁴

In the *Swakanthey* issue, previously cited, the editor wrote: "In rural areas, where there have not reached the touch of anything western, women who have willingly exited life send us their cryptic messages through their suicides" (Ghosh 2016, 34). SFE members even went to investigate one such suicide of two young women, who belonged to poor, Scheduled Caste families and lived in a rural region of West Bengal that had become infamous as a site of popular resistance to forced industrialization and dispossession. The double suicide formed the basis of a documentary film that the organization supported. Critics accused the film of a classic Spivakean error: of speaking on behalf of the subaltern only to further silence her, while fortifying the subjectivity and agency of those who cast themselves as her savior (Chatterjee 2018; Bhattacharya 2020). Apparently, hostile villagers also "stalled the shoot and the documentary corroborates this by showing villagers asking the director to stop filming" (Bhattacharya 2020, 158). Some SFE members later expressed regret at entering a space "alien" to them, to place its inhabitants under "investigation" (Chatterjee 2018).

But the ease with which urban individuals and groups could enter—and exit—the rural is unsurprising and not unique to such types of activism or even to this particular NGO. It speaks

to long histories of urban educated Indian activists, whether Gandhian or Maoist, “returning” to the village for social justice and development work. In West Bengal, radical left identity was historically constituted through specific imaginings of rural Bengal, as a site of the primitive and premodern, full of purity, innocence, and passivity, but also revolutionary promise that could be unleashed with external (urban/middle class) intervention. Postcolonial Indian feminists too were deeply invested in “the moral virtue of poverty” (Dave 2012) and established their early authenticity and relevance by speaking on behalf of poor, rural others (John 1996). These affective and representational economies had a direct bearing on how poverty came to be prioritized over the politics of sexuality, to the exclusion and even negation of lesbian identity and (injurious) experience. As queer feminisms grew and entered the mainstream, they were similarly haunted by the *gramer meye* for failing to interrogate their own metrocentric limits and class-caste biases. Activist and organizational strategies that fall short of building robust analyses of differences and inequalities, even when they demonstrate commitments to intersectionality or “diversity,” have been attributed to global funder-driven obligations (Ghosh 2015). But in this feminist field, compulsions to reach, even “save” the *gramer meye* and to achieve intersectionality had other lineages, showing important continuities across time and place.

The trajectory of this one queer feminist organization shows that there were still other ways to claim and *do* intersectionality, including through a “letting go” of the defensiveness with which activists approached their own class and locational limits (Nash 2019). On the eve of Sappho’s 20th year, in 2020, a statement issued on their Facebook page included the following:

Our location in an urban middle-class setting has brought with it certain advantages and resources. We remain aware that such privileges often tend to create a divide with other geographical and social cultural settings that might not be equipped with the resources that we have been able to access. While we have taken this critique seriously keeping the lens of reflexivity focused on ourselves, we are also careful not to self-flagellate ourselves to the extent where we end up producing locational binaries between an “authentic non-urban” and an “inauthentic urban”. After all, the urban, middle-class is not a homogenous reality, and numerous individuals, who despite being located in urban middle-class settings, are the target of different forms of violence within domestic and familial spaces. Therefore, we stand to work across this locational difference. We are reflective of the fact that there is a need to unpack and understand such labels that tend to reduce the complexity of lives lived at intersections of diverse marginalizations and privileges in different geographical scales.

Rather than employ intersectionality to defensively negotiate one’s privileged class location—and reproduce, however inadvertently, essentialist assumptions around non-metropolitan and subaltern identities—activists embarked on letting go of defensiveness to mark new ways of relating to others and to the self. The travels of intersectionality in the life of this one organization could lead to easy conclusions of the inadequacy or even the failure of the concept, attributable to its “facilitated” arrival via funding networks and transnational imperatives (Menon 2015). Yet, the density of the local and the multiple spatio-temporalities into which “the concept” arrived offered activists specific ways of negotiating the paradoxical possibilities of the present, besides encountering the ghosts of the past, differently.

21.3 South African student movements: intersectional, decolonial

In comparison to queer feminist activists in Kolkata at least, feminist and queer student activists in South African cities like Cape Town and Johannesburg developed a far more explicit attach-

ment to and articulation of an intersectional politics. Black women, trans, and queer students used intersectionality not only to center issues of gender and sexuality in struggles to decolonize the university and South African society at large, but also to name patriarchy and rape culture in movement spaces, at the hands of their own male comrades. These students, who were at the forefront of “Fallist” movements, fought simultaneously on two fronts: as part of an intersectional, decolonial struggle *and* as what one activist called a “quiet revolution,” which tried to keep the movement accountable to its commitments to intersectionality (White 2016).

The Fallist movements exploded on South African university campuses in 2015 and 2016, with the most well-known of these circulating, globally, as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall. While initially over the raising of university tuition fees, they quickly morphed into a struggle for a number of issues, insisting on a project of decolonizing the university and challenging neoliberal imperatives in higher education. Alongside the demand to stop fee increases—and eventually, to remove fees entirely—they aligned with precarious service workers in their longstanding demand to be “insourced.” They also addressed the university as a site of gender-based and sexual violence, in continuum with and not as a departure from the endemic forms of “GBV” that South Africa faces. Moving quickly beyond claims on the university alone, they sought to hold to account the failures of the ANC government itself, rejecting what it had offered since 1994—nationalism, transformation, and nonracialism, embodied in the idea of the rainbow nation. As a first generation of “born free” Black South Africans, the students “ruptured the legitimacy of postapartheid democracy and demanded a reopening of the history of South African politics and its associated visions of the future” (Gillespie and Naidoo 2019, 229).

These struggles were as consequential in material terms—scrapping fee increments, insourcing workers, and moving from loans to scholarships in higher education (Veriava 2019)—as they were in shifting ways of knowing and knowledge-production, acting as “epistemological ruptures” (Lewis and Hendricks 2017). The students brought back into the political fray traditions like Black consciousness (BC) and Pan-Africanism (PA), which had nurtured the liberation struggle (Gillespie and Naidoo 2019). But they also drew centrally on a “newer” concept—intersectionality—in ways that catapulted an otherwise academic feminist term into mainstream visibility. They attempted to sculpt “a distinctly South African intersectionality” (Khan 2017, 117), given the concept’s African American roots but also the specificity of the conjuncture into which it had arrived.⁵ Apartheid’s success in imposing and entrenching cultures of “division and differences” (Gqola 2001, 132) had not only impeded the scope for Black solidarity – a central tenant of BC – but also for recognizing multiple, overlapping, and co-existent systems of power and oppression. A decolonial intersectional praxis meant that struggles against racism or white supremacy or patriarchy could not take precedence over one another, in a conjuncture in which, as Kopano Ratele (2016, 56) put it, “struggles against injustice therefore cannot but embrace intersectionality.”

BC, PA, and intersectionality created “both epistemological and material possibilities for expanding liberation” (Khan 2017, 110). As the student movement’s three intellectual pillars, they were not however easily reconciled with one another. The movement deployed intersectionality precisely as a way to go beyond the limits of historic BC ideologies and movements, in which race was considered “the primary oppressive force” (Gqola 2001, 134). “Younger” womxn and trans activists saw in intersectionality the promise of countering historic trends that did not recognize the specificity of the category Pumla Gqola names, “Blackwoman.” But on the ground, activists experienced the fragility and indeed, the backlash of trying to secure and sustain a genuinely intersectional struggle. Activist-scholar Leigh-Ann Naidoo (2016a) provides a close mapping of the conflictual terrain in which intersectionality felt incommensurate with other ideological leanings of the movement:

The balancing act of BC, Pan-Africanism and intersectionality meant that there were more women and queer students voicing their concerns and participating more fully in the early stages of the movements. But as the student movements continued to struggle to decolonise their universities through an intersectional understanding of privilege and oppression, there was more and more resistance from a number of men in the movements who tried to argue that the issue of racism should trump all other issues. There was a shift from the October 2015 #FeesMustFall protests that placed class squarely on the struggle agenda, which resulted in movements centering race and class as the primary oppressive systems to fight against. Many students made the argument that the struggle needed to focus on one or two things and could not take on everything at once. Black queer feminists in the movement resisted this approach and continued to draw attention to the oppressive systems of patriarchy and homophobia, compelling their heterosexual male comrades to recognise that while they are oppressed as black men in a university system and world that continues to privilege whiteness, they are simultaneously privileged as men by patriarchy and by heteronormativity as heterosexual. The key issue has proved to be a challenge internal to most student movements and highlights the continued ideological and power struggles taking place.

(183)

Intersectionality, at the hands of Black, queer feminist students, had more labor to perform, though, than to simply remind male comrades of the intersecting logics and manifestations of patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, coloniality, and racism. It served the urgent and difficult task of critiquing the movement from within, by those most minoritized by it. Sharp cleavages emerged around experiences of patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and hetero- and cis-normativity, especially amongst those most visible and vulnerable to such violence and those most protected from or even complicit in it (see Dlakavu 2017). While trends of silencing and normalizing sexism were familiar from historic BC movements (see Gqola 2001), what was unique to this moment was the emergence of an unapologetic feminist challenge to “the oppression and discipline of patriarchy within the movement itself” (Mabaso 2017, 99; see also Ndelu, Dlakavu, and Boswell 2017).

It fell to those who comprised the “margin within the margins,” to wage an internal revolt—a quiet revolution—“within a hetero-sexist patriarchal #FeesmustFall” (White 2016, 28). During FME, at least, “intersectionality” became the site of actual conflicts amongst activists, with one set blaming the other for “using the rhetoric [as] an ideological stance attempting to derail the broader movement” (Jacobs 2017, 120). Self-identified queer, trans, and feminist students—encompassed in the category of “womxn”—were at the receiving end of such backlash; they persisted in the labor of making intersectionality speak to their comrades. But, across different university campuses, Fallist movement spaces were experienced as ones in which the promise of intersectionality had, in fact, failed: “Black cis and trans women and non-binary people worked hard to ensure that the decolonial agenda was truly intersectional. In theory it was a success, in practice patriarchy and cis-heteronormativity prevailed” (Kim in Matandela 2017, 27).

The failures—even farce—of intersectionality were experienced in particularly intense ways when the movement emerged as a site of sexual violence, of the violation of comrades by other comrades. Instances of rape and sexual assault that occurred within movement spaces—during occupations and protest actions on campuses—traveled to mainstream media as multiple hashtags (#UWCRapeAlert, #RapeatAzania, #PatriarchyMustFall #EndRapeCulture, #RURReferenceList, #IAMOneInThree). These hashtags showed the leaky nature of rape cul-

tures—from society at large to university campuses to progressive movements from which “progressive” men were certainly not exempt (see Breakey 2022).

If BC arrived in South Africa in a conjuncture where women—and gender—did not seem to matter (Gqola 2001), then intersectionality arrived at a time when feminists struggled to make sexual violence matter, greatly. They called sustained attention to a pandemic of femicide, corrective rape, and direct violence on women and queers—to a South African nightmare, as Gqola named it (2015). Womxn students placed sexual violence at the center of their intersectional decolonial struggle on university campuses, tracing its stubborn endurance to entangled colonial and apartheid legacies (see Gouws 2017). Through their naked marches, brandishing of sjamboks, online naming and shaming, and careful consciousness-raising, they made clear that they would no longer tolerate societal tolerance of such injury and injustice. They received little support from (cis-het) male comrades. One critical event in the early life of RMF—when a female comrade accused a fellow comrade of raping her in occupied “Azania House” at UCT—shows how much students poured their hopes for a different feminist future into “intersectionality,” which also came to contain their feelings of desperation and disappointment. As I show in the last and final section, “Azania” embodied intersectionality’s fragile, even incommensurate life in this movement, but it also signaled what could be and was yet to come.

21.4 Back to the future?

In their essay titled “Cold Future,” Kelly Gillespie and Leigh-Ann Naidoo (2019) draw out the specific temporal logics and claims towards futurity in the student movements. In their recovery of past political ideologies and histories—such as BC, PA, and in the evocation of “Azania”—the students reopened the past for a future that they ought to have been delivered but were effectively cheated out of. Instead, in the impasses of the present, the future had effectively gone cold and needed to be remembered and recast. The students were reopening the question of political time, asking anew: “what time is it?” (Naidoo 2016b, 49).

Womxn in Fallist movements were also “time-travellers” (49); their quiet revolution emerged a terrain for imagining and building “worlds to come” (Nuttall 2019). And in spite of their own feelings and declarations of intersectionality’s failure, the concept was critical to their investments in feminist futurity. If queer feminist activists in India turned backward in their struggles against queer normalization—especially in a wider context of global neoliberalism—then feminist Fallists conjured up and made room for what could be but did not yet exist. Their “hallucinations” (Naidoo 2016b) both converged with but also disrupted a wider activist claim to the future, through an insistence on and demand for intersectionality. After all, intersectionality functioned less as a coherent conceptual map in these movement spaces, than as “sites of intensity that articulate a coming to political consciousness” (Mupotsa 2019, 4).

Naidoo (2016b) points to generational fault lines that emerged in the wake of these movements, with anti-apartheid activists declaring the call to revolution as being out of step with post-apartheid democratic time. If “older” activists accused Fallists of being out of touch and time, then self-identified older feminists accused younger activists of forgetting past struggles and their continued relevance (Miller 2015). Much of their disquiet centered around the deployment of intersectionality, more as a slogan than as a concrete epistemic intervention, which easily devolved into single-axis thinking—either privileging race or gender—and essentialized identity (Miller 2015; Gouws 2017; Lewis and Hendricks 2017). But beyond these typical criticisms of intersectionality—which feminist Fallists identified in their own critiques of the movement—generational logics produced a new radical African intersectional feminist as refusing to inherit the class and anti-capitalist analyses of the past, turning instead to transnational, especially American

political vocabularies that fell prey to neoliberal logics (Lewis and Hendricks 2017). Such linear, generational accounts—undergirded by attachments to loss and recovery—typically flatten the multiple times through which the present is seamed (as Nuttall 2009 observed about the immediate post-apartheid years). Fallist movements held the possibility of recovering *and* reinventing the past, but they also offered temporalities other than those normatively linear or progressive. Intersectionality enabled rather than foreclosed the possibilities for a future-oriented, even utopian politics.

This might sound surprising to some. Indeed, Nash (2011) argues (after Jasbir Puar), that intersectionality is not amenable to futurity, being “present-oriented.” Insofar as it seeks to make visible identities and injustices in the here and now, intersectionality disavows futurity. Nash contrasts this dominant strand in Black feminist theorising with an older political tradition, which she calls “black feminist love-politics,” one that eschews attachments to the present and to fixed selves to “dream of a yet unwritten future.” Like queer recastings of time and temporality, Black feminist love-politics is invested, unlike mainstream usages of intersectionality that can collapse into identity politics, not in what *is* but what *could be*, or the future as a locus of possibility.

For sure, the student movements lend to wider critiques of intersectionality as essentializing identities or visibilizing what is there for the purposes of inclusion, at the cost of more radical, transformative, and future-oriented agendas. That is, if we read Fallists as quite closely tied to intersectionality’s origins: to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s original emphasis on the intersectional nature of social identities and the interlocking dynamics of relations of power, in ways that some have read (Gouws 2017, 1). But if we treat intersectionality as a site of intensity, as a coming-to political consciousness, even of affective excess, then the conjuncture into which it landed offers scope for a different reading. Womxn Fallists harnessed the concept to do more than name identity—gender or race—as fixed essences, around which their claims for visibility and inclusion cohered. They used it more so as a tool to diagnose the limits and frictions in Black solidarity, especially along the fault lines of gender and sexuality.

If the student movement was, as Gillespie and Naidoo (2019, 235) claim, an extended experimentation with a politics of Blackness—to affirm a new Black subjectivity and a future into which “black students felt willing to step”—then intersectionality, in proving incommensurate with some articulations of political Blackness (BC), voiced “the difficulties of Black solidarity” (Mupotsa 2019, 4). These difficulties exceeded the kinds of gender-specific violence, injury, and exclusion that this new political grammar made visible and nameable within and beyond the space of the movement; they also came to contain womxn students’ sharp sense of disappointment and betrayal at sources of violence and injury within the movement. When they recast the movement as a site of failed intersectional possibilities, they named the tensions, connections, and contradictions—the frictions (Tsing 2005)—intrinsic to projects and promises of Black solidarity. Failure and friction both presumed and prefigured “that which does not yet exist; that which only exists in an incipient state; or that which, it is hoped, is still to come” (Nuttall 2019).

At the time of #RapeAtAzania, student activist, Wandile Dlamini (2015) wrote:

A hashtag like #RapeAtAzania should be contradictory because Azania as a space is supposed to be a one of refuge ... a space that we come to after experiencing teargas, rubber bullets and police brutality; a space that we go to in order to flee the institutional and social violence. We are not supposed to have violations of safety, psyche and bodies at Azania.

Azania was the name used by nationalist formations, including BC and PA movements during the liberation struggle, to refer to South Africa. RMF activists evoked this (lost) past as the site

of a Black future. Contestations within the movement around gender and sexuality led naturally to Azania, disrupting and expanding this locus of Black political futurity (in ways that Black feminist imaginations inevitably do; see Pinto 2018). In their disappointment with what Azania had failed to be, Dlamini also imagined what it could be:

If Azania practiced intersectionality, there wouldn't be an extraordinary need for people to prove why someone's presence or actions is violent.
It wouldn't be an uphill battle to get Azania to talk about patriarchy and hypermasculinity
It wouldn't be an uphill battle to get Azania to swiftly deal with violent people in the space
There wouldn't be a need for us to prove why dealing with patriarchy is of importance
All of these things would happen naturally in an intersectional space.
But Azania is not an intersectional space ... At least, not yet.

Throughout the life (and afterlife) of the student movement, feminist, queer, and trans activists materialized a different Azania. At Wits University, for instance, #MbokodoLead started trending three days after the students occupied key parts of the university to mark and shift patriarchal power dynamics within the movement. Through their aesthetics, political rhetoric and affect, womxn students sought "to create safer spaces where Black women's ideas, political agency and being would be valued" (Dlakavu, 2017, 111; see also Veriava 2019 and Mabaso 2017).

At UCT, the Trans Collective disrupted a photographic exhibition of #RMF by stripping and painting over images, to protest not just their erasure from these commemorative events, but also the erasure of the "quiet revolution" that they had led. In a statement explaining their intervention, the trans collective (formed in the early days of RMF and responsible for an intersectionality audit committee), had this to say:

Our intervention is an act of black love. It is a commitment towards making RMF the fallist space of our dreams. It forms part of the journey towards the 'logical conclusion' of the decolonisation project. There will be no Azania if black men simply fall into the throne of the white man without any comprehensive reorganisation of power along all axis of the white supremacist, imperialist, ablist, capitalist cisheteropatriarchy.

(UCT Trans Collective 2016, 27)

Azania was not simply a locus of failed (intersectional) potentialities and scripts of disappointment, betrayal, and loss. It was also about what could be possible, a claim toward not-as-yet scripted but possible alternative worlds. Intersectionality gave these students the political grammar to imagine and conjure these utopian desires, rooted not in the identitarian politics of gender or race (or past political struggles), but in the kind of Black feminist love-politics that Nash (2011) describes. The trans statement powerfully concludes with, "We are the trans people who have loved RMF even when it did not love us. Aluta Continua" (2016, 27).

21.5 Conclusion

Intersectionality has been marked by excessive travel—travel that has taken it beyond its intellectual, discursive, and spatial origins, stretching but also diluting, many have argued, the analytical bite and political imperative of the concept. But anxieties over travel—and origins—tend to

ignore where concepts land, and how their arrival might be marked not so much by “co-option” by other forces but by a “foldedness” into what exists (Nuttall 2009). The language of travel also produces a forgetting of the fundamental amenability of concepts to change; ideas do different work in different contexts not because of loss or mutation through travel but because of their incomplete, impure, leaky, and fungible nature.

In placing, alongside each other, two distinct accounts of intersectionality’s arrival into the Global South, I have been less interested in these sites as marking the concept’s possibilities or limits, than in how they produced the need for and attachments to specific kinds of affective, epistemic, and political aspirations. Intersectionality’s arrival gives us important clues as to which intersections come to matter and why, and how these constitute the grounds for specific kinds of activist imaginations and interventions. In neoliberal India, proto-intersectional stances and sensibilities served “backward” forms of queer activism, which reproduced metropolitan queer feminist activists as saviors of subalterns, partly to manage the effects of global neoliberal capitalism on activist futures. In the mythic figure of the *gramer meye*, we find some of the historical and regional entanglements in which millennial queer feminist activism found itself. This mythic subject shaped specific intersectional possibilities, in a moment of unprecedented queer visibility and progress.

While queer feminist activists in India rearticulated the concept through existing political grammars and relations (around class and subalternity), queer feminist Fallists deployed intersectionality to name the limits, tensions, and potentialities in historic projects around Black solidarity. Intersectionality’s visibility made a lot visible; a new kind of radical feminist energy and internal contests and divides that were not unique to this movement or moment, but were far more nameable as “intersectionality.” The conjuncture into which intersectionality arrived—the high tide of the student movements and hyper-intolerance toward patriarchy and rape culture—offered a way to reorient both historical movements and present(ist) identity politics toward future-oriented feminist world-making possibilities.

Fallism has, of course, emerged as a traveling concept in its own right. Against usual presumptions of “global unidirectionality” (John 2015), Fallism traveled from the south to the north, most prominently as #RMFOxford. But it also traveled within the Global South in ways that are less recognized. Indian students took up the hashtag to reveal the Indian state itself as a colonizing power and to materialize more intersectional protest cultures (see Sumati 2016).

Even the short travels of this relatively new political idea force a shift from predictable stories of origin and travel—from the northern epicenter to the global periphery—to complex mappings of arrival onto southern shores. That concepts might look, sound, and feel different in different political and historical contexts is surely evidence that they can never be universal or pure or simply applicable anywhere. Intersectionality’s arrival in the Global South offers, then, an opportunity for thinking about the impurity in which concepts always reside.

Notes

- 1 I am thinking for instance for Sara Salem’s (2016) worries that intersectionality has traveled so far from its radical origins that it has effectively mutated into something else, easily co-opted by neoliberalism. In contrast, Nivedita Menon (2015) uses intersectionality’s take up in India to unpack the deficiencies in the concept itself, rooted in its imperial origins and “facilitated travel,” by transnational donors and Western knowledge-producers, including feminists. In such accounts, intersectionality’s travel becomes a way of marking its co-option or inherent inadequacy.
- 2 These claims echo with Menon’s (2015) arguments around how gender has always been intersectional in India. In her rejection of Western-derived intersectionality analysis, Menon says that single-axis logics around “woman” never existed in “our” feminisms, as woman was always undercut by class, caste, religion, and community.

- 3 Love's *Feeling Backward* cautions against queer temporalities that repress "the stubborn negativity of the past" in a rush to move forward, to queer success and positivity, increasingly expressed in (homo) normative terms (Love 2007, 147). Her caution is widely registered by several queer theorists for whom queerness disrupts linear progression. Unlike some, though, Love (2007, 7) is clear that she is not rejecting the idea of the future itself, but is interested in "celebrations of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in explorations of haunting and memory, and in stubborn attachments to lost objects."
- 4 Dave (2012) shows how, in the political expansion of early lesbian activism, the support group became the locus for meeting the needs of those lesbians who were construed as desiring but fundamentally apolitical, in need of safety and support alone.
- 5 Activists also acknowledged proto-intersectional leanings in Black women's experiences and activism before this moment (Khan 2017; Matandela 2017).

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PART IV

Intersectional borderwork



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REIMAGINING INTERSECTIONALITY VIA THE RURAL–URBAN BORDERLANDS

Roxanna Villalobos

22.1 Introduction

Even with the recent interest in intersectionality which has necessarily renewed and re-energized debates in feminism about diversity and inclusion, the question of how women are differently positioned because of their non-metropolitan location has remained largely overlooked.

—*Pini, Branth, and Little, Feminisms and Ruralities (2015, 1)*

Women of Color¹ intersectional feminisms have generated a rich plurality in theorizing difference, reformulating epistemological understandings of identity–formation, power relations, and ontology. At its core, intersectionality remains politically attuned to the structural realities that shape the lives of women of color and the varied marginalized communities they navigate. Even as intersectional analyses of difference contend with the complexities of identity and its contingent relationship to space/place—scaling from the local to the global—intersectional theory remains limited in theorizing rurality. As an analytical framework and complex material reality, rurality has been overwhelmingly undertheorized within United States–based intersectional feminist theory, as rural feminists Pini, Branth, and Little contend above. *Does US intersectionality employ an urban-centered optics?* If so, what is the impact of a US-based intersectionality that employs an urban-centered optics? Taking these questions as a point of departure, I critically examine intersectionality’s epistemological myopia while steadfast in my commitment to not “throwaway” intersectionality altogether. As a Woman of Color feminist, I remain invested in the intellectual and political promises of intersectionality, contending that its continual value derives from the field’s feminist commitment to creating viable and urgent social transformation.

Centralizing and normalizing urban life, politics, and place-making—inadvertently or not—reinforces the political investment in the meta-narrative of Western modernity. Whether in a pre- or post-modern moment in time, the linear model of modern development spatializes the Global North, and the US more specifically, as the epitome of modern development: a post-industrial, technologically advanced, wealthy *metropolitan*² nation. Moreover, as transnational feminists and critical queer scholars have aptly noted, discourses surrounding queer and gender

migration conceptualize the Global North as ripe with sexual and feminist freedoms to legitimize imperial and colonizing discourses and interventions in the Global South (Grewal and Kaplan 2001; Luibhéid 2008; and Manalansan 2006). The US settler-colonial state³ and its continual production of Western modernity as a discursive, cultural, and economic field of power relations structures the world into a south–north spatial dichotomy (along with its political derivatives of non–West/West, third world/first world, and developing/developed, respectively) via the temporal and spatial logics of “progress” and moving “forward.”⁴ The developmental framework of Western modernity essentializes the Global South/“third world” as backward and pre-modern via imaginations of the rural. Furthermore, this developmental framework similarly constructs US racialized rural contexts as part of a colonial and/or pre-industrial past, erasing rural poor Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) in the contemporary United States, while distancing and containing the white supremacist and homo/transphobic violence rampant across the US as exclusive to poor, rural white spaces (Halberstam 2005; Abelson 2019). Overall, the rural is erased or distanced.

Not merely a description of geographical land, rurality is an analytical framework that may hold Global North knowledge production accountable to the politics of global capitalist modernity constitutive of nation-making “at home” (Roshanravan 2012) in the United States. What happens when we view the US via the rural? As rurality pervasively remains invisible or merely a geographical description, we (as feminist scholars) must account for the optics⁵ of contemporary intersectional theory and research, constantly shifting the purview of our vision and imagination by spatializing the questions posed and issues investigated. How do feminist consciousness, praxis, and inquiry take shape in rural spaces across different scales, regions, and nations? What does the vision from the rural bring into view in a particular time and place? These questions cannot be adequately answered here; lovingly, I offer them as an open invitation for other scholars to continue the conversation in their intersectional inquiries.

Instead, this paper calls for a spatial contextualization of intersectionality and its analyses of identity, power, and social formations by changing the theoretical optics of its epistemology. Simply “adding and stirring” rurality as a “variable” within feminist inquiries would reify an either/or relationship between the urban and the rural in existing intersectional scholarship, leaving its optics unchanged and unaccounted for. As Haraway (1988) reminds us, “an optics is a politics of positioning” (586), and so, intersectional inquiry must contend with the politics of the vision it employs, as well as account for its partiality, limitations, and relationality. If the urban exists relationally to the rural, bringing the rural into vision will fundamentally reshape the contours of intersectional analyses and praxis. Intersectionality, then, should actively foreground its “situated and embodied knowledges” and refuse to remain unlocatable, and thus, remain “unable to be called into account” (583).

The beauty of continually changing intersectionality’s theoretical optics lies in the epistemological necessity of shifting in and out of multiple spaces, places, subjectivities, histories, and cultures. This chapter, consequently, offers one of many rural kaleidoscopes to intersectionality. Taking inspiration from Gloria Anzaldúa’s borderlands theory, I offer to change the optics of contemporary intersectionality through the conceptual framework of the *rural–urban borderlands*, the liminal space existing between the borders neatly dividing the urban from the rural, a political and cultural delineation of land and space invested in the reification of the modern capitalist state. Anzaldúa’s “borderlands” denotes “that space in which antithetical elements mix, neither obliterate each other nor to be subsumed by a larger whole, but rather to combine in unique and unexpected ways” (Cantú and Hurtado, 2012, 13). Thus, the concept of the rural–urban borderlands offers intersectionality analytical frameworks that capture contingent, nuanced, and fluid accounts of both power and subjectivity situated in the liminal spaces between and across the rural and the urban. To account for rurality, the paper bridges together intersectionality and

transnational feminism (Falcón and Nash 2015) via Latina feminist scholarship. Transnational Latina feminisms contain the analytical scope—via borderlands theory—to excavate the rural into intersectionality’s purview.

22.2 An urbanized critical praxis and inquiry

How has *the urban* been implicitly framed as *the* “woman of color location” (Crenshaw 1989) within US intersectional feminist theory? While the answer is more complicated and nuanced than can be captured in this chapter, we can begin by exploring intersectionality as an academic field implicated by Western academia’s politics and structural limitations. Rurality’s absence or descriptive simplification correlates with the neoliberalization of the US university system that operates under the temporal and spatial logics of global capitalist modernity. The urbanized myopia within intersectionality is primarily a consequence of the overall mischaracterization and misuse of intersectionality’s essential contributions within US popular discourse and the US neoliberal academy, which reduces intersectionality to a theoretical buzzword (Davis 2008) for diversity and inclusion (Ahmed 2012). The reductionist use of intersectionality limits its analytical purview to a tired, repetitive defense of its epistemological contributions (Nash 2019).

Intersectionality’s long history shows a mutually constitutive relationship between critical inquiry and critical praxis (Collins and Bilge 2016)⁶ that is hard to untangle, as this interconnection emerged as an iterative, non-linear process from on-the-ground feminist activism. Hancock (2016) and Collins and Bilge (2016) are recent scholars who have taken up the task to trace intersectionality’s heterogeneous activist and theoretical genealogy, dating it further back than its official coinage in the early 1990s by Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Collins (1990). Both books contextualize the official formation of intersectionality as primarily emerging during the 1960s to 1980s, a moment of social upheaval that ruptured into multiple and coexisting movements for justice. “Intersectional-like” (Hancock 2016) activist tactics emerged from women of color participating in and simultaneously critiquing single-issue social movements, which overwhelmingly erased the acute and distinct forms of marginalization experienced by working-class and queer women of color. Structural and intimate forms of violence against women of color remained invisible even as struggles for Black liberation, Chicano rights, and women’s rights gained traction in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. Women of color took “what they learned in social movements to frame analyses of social inequality” (Collins and Bilge 2016, 64), and these lessons also extended from the erasure they experienced in institutions, social contexts, and within their communities.

The socio-spatial conditions and economic formations surrounding the 1960s to 1980s social movement upheaval illustrate the metropolitan centrality within intersectionality as critical praxis and inquiry. The formalization of feminist of color activism was possible due to the social networks, activist infrastructure, labor force participation, and access to higher education—conditions necessary for upward mobility—available to women of color, particularly for Black and Chicana women in urban cities during the 1960s and 1970s (Blackwell 2011; Roth 2004). Benita Roth (2004) contends it is upwardly mobile or formally educated women of color who obtained the necessary opportunities and resources to publish their writing, formalize grassroots coalitions, participate in social movement organizing, and create sustainable feminist networks. Roth addresses the precise changing historical conditions leading to formal feminist activism between the 1960s and 1970s across race and ethnicity:

Middle-class women were the ones with resources necessary to protest collectively; gender-specific changes in women's labor force participation and attendance at insti-

tutions of higher education indicated an increase level of resources available to potential women activists. In the “younger” branch of feminism especially, African American, white, and Chicana feminists were largely college educated, and by virtue of their college education, upwardly mobile in comparison with others in their communities. (32)

Roth emphasizes it was upwardly mobile Black and Chicana feminists—who had more “class privilege compared to others in their communities” (32)—that accessed the resources necessary to mobilize effectively. Through proximity to and affiliation with public institutions and organizations in urban cities—from universities and colleges to non-profit and community-based organizations—a select group of women of color activists accessed a vital infrastructure necessary to implement critical praxis, and later, institutionalize critical inquiry.

Because cities brought together different racial and ethnic communities in one geographical location, urban centers organically generated intersectional analyses as spaces and contexts of racial, cultural, and economic multiplicity developed. Historically, glaring differences in education, healthcare, and incarceration between racialized inner-city communities and white suburbs have exposed the systemic nature of white supremacy, racial capitalism, and heteropatriarchy in clear and undeniable ways. For instance, in the 1981 preface to *This Bridge Called My Back*, titled “La Jornada,” Cherríe Moraga chronicles her personal journey in publishing the anthology, which is in large part due to the activist networks and relationships she made with other women of color. Moraga conjures up two specific locations constitutive of her feminist consciousness, leading to the publication of *This Bridge*. Witnessing the racial differences in Boston neighborhoods during her visits to collaborate with Barbara Smith in Roxbury, an inner-city Black neighborhood in Boston, she states, “I want a movement that helps me make some sense of the trip from Watertown to Roxbury, from white to black. I love women the entire way, beyond a doubt” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015, xxxvi). Here Moraga illuminates how urban cities’ social, economic, and political conditions were essential for feminist of color organizing and consciousness-raising. Urban cities contained the infrastructure required to travel, organize, and connect with other women of color outside of their communities.

Without these structural conditions, I ask, would we have *This Bridge Called My Back*? It is vital to recognize the geopolitical contexts from which women of color activism emerged to unveil how intersectional critical praxis and inquiry primarily materialized within urban contexts. This paper does not argue that this socio-historical contextualization of intersectional activism is inherently negative or necessarily limiting (at its inception). I contend these social and political conditions found in metropolitan city centers were indispensable for forming Women of Color theory. However, the necessity of an urban multiplicity for feminist activism does not absolve intersectionality from spatially situating its knowledge formations today.

Intersectionality’s emergence into the US university system in the early 1990s carries the legacy of the social and structural conditions that shaped on-the-ground intersectional feminist activism. Further, intersectionality’s institutionalization into the US corporate university system has reduced the generative analytical fissures, frictions, and affinities between women of color feminisms into an emptied tagline peppered across university websites, policies, scholarship, and syllabi as intersectionality increases in popularity. Intersectionality’s myopic use from the outside has further solidified the urban bias within the field because many women of color feminist scholars are implicitly forced into an epistemological role of defending (Nash 2019) its (urban-centered) activist and theoretical roots and contributions.

Complicating matters, intersectionality has increasingly been used synonymously with diversity, where tacking on “intersectionality” on documents and policy becomes the extent of a

university’s diversity work. While diversity policies or laws may reflect an institution that is just or not racist, Sarah Ahmed (2012) indicates that the language and discourses these documents utilize merely serve a *performative* role. That is, they simply create a façade of equality since the institutions largely remain pervasively racist (32) despite having diversity in their mission statement, instituting a diversity office, or employing diversity officers. Often, the performative aspect of diversity employs intersectionality in empty ways, stripping it away from its theoretical objectives:

the focus on intersectionality within feminism of color meant a concern with the points at which power relations meet, then it is worth noting that these points often recede from view. This is why when we attend to intersectionality we are actually making a point. There is labor in attending to what recedes from view. We can ask: what recedes when diversity becomes a view? If diversity is a way of viewing or even picturing an institution, then it might allow only some things to come into view. Diversity is often used as shorthand for inclusion, as the “happy point” of intersectionality, a point where lines meet. When intersectionality becomes a “happy point,” the feminist of color critique is obscured.

(14)

The popularization of intersectionality within and beyond the US university system has indeed obscured the feminist of color critique, receding from view its generative multiplicity, collaborations, debates, and fluidity. Unfortunately, this popularization has resulted in relying on women of color feminist scholars to address intersectionality’s reductionism, thereby limiting their critical analyses of pressing political issues. Black feminist scholars, in particular, have been asked to define, explain, or correct (Nash 2019) intersectionality within the university, as well as to create diversity policy (Ahmed 2012, 2017; Collins and Bilge 2016) and to craft women’s studies “progressive” curriculum and scholarship that “fixes” the racist undercurrents of white hegemonic feminism (Collins and Bilge 2016; Nash 2019).

What would intersectionality look like if we move beyond a defensive or corrective role? While Nash aims this question at fellow Black feminists, I heed this call to action to think from my own location as a woman of color, to think about the absence that haunts me (Gordon 2008)—the rural spaces I called home growing up.

22.3 Conceptualizing rurality through Latina transnational feminisms

22.3.1 The rural as elsewhere

Women's studies departments began to embrace the “global turn” in the 1990s (Falcón and Nash, 2015), alongside the institutionalization of intersectionality, invoking analyses of domination that extend beyond the US. The popularization of the global turn in women’s studies overwhelmingly decentered the nation–state as a unit of analysis (Fernandes 2013), looking to the global to invoke shared experiences of patriarchy. As such, US feminist theory centered the urban, while global scholarship on gender centered the rural, reifying a liberal–regressive dichotomy between the urban and the rural. This dichotomization marked poor third-world women as repressed compared to their first-world women counterparts in the US and other Global North locations (Mohanty 2003).

Otherizing the rural is an instrumental political tool used to reinforce the conception that Global North locations like the United States and Europe are democratic, liberating, and wel-

coming host countries to migrants from the Global South who experience human rights violations in relation to their sexualities and gender, for instance. The rural–urban spatial dichotomy is thus utilized as a physical materialization of a “modernity” timeline, wherein migration from the rural to the urban is held as a trajectory towards progress—whether that is measured through upward mobility, gender equality, sexual liberation, or human rights incorporation. However, the narrative of a timeline toward forward “progress” is far from true. Sexuality research by Luibhéid (2008) and Manalansan (2006) shows queer migrants experience inequalities and processes of racialization in their host countries and within metropolitan cities that counter discourses of freedom when analyzed through an intersectional framework.

Leela Fernandes (2013) and Chandra Mohanty (2003) note the United States has historically utilized the discourse of a progressive democracy that is sexually liberating and feminist to justify war and imperial expansion in the Middle East and other parts of the world. US political expansionism and overseas economic intervention become justified due to its global image of progress, democracy, and liberation, ideologies it claims to export to other countries, though it ultimately serves as a disguise for covert political domination. In these discourses, rural locations in the Global South provide the imagery of extreme patriarchy and homophobia, which is then used in US imperialist and settler–colonialist projects abroad. For this reason, theorizing the rural within the US and acknowledging the systematic and acute forms of marginalization experienced by poor rural communities of color remain threatening to imperialist endeavors of the United States. The outward shift of the Western gaze elides how the active spatialization of land within the United States contributes to imperialist endeavors at “home” (Roshanravan 2012) as well. As Fernandes reminds us, “discarding the nation–state as a unit of analysis does not automatically dislodge a U.S.–centric epistemic project” (2013, 6).

22.3.2 Bridging intersectionality and transnationalism

Intersectionality presses upon its epistemological limits when it inadvertently reifies a rural/urban binary. This geographic binary is much more insidious and implicit in feminist and sexuality scholarship because this binary is often treated as a given apolitical reality. The rural/urban binary is reproduced when: (1) scholars treat the rural and urban as descriptive geographical regions or objective reality, thus occluding how these categories of space/place are historically produced as well as mutually constituted and relationally contingent; and (2) rurality becomes reduced to and synonymous to the Global South imagination and its economically “developing” nations, thereby positioning Global North countries, such as the US, as primarily a metropolitan (“economically, politically, and culturally developed”) nation.

One way to dismantle the urban–liberal and rural–regressive dichotomy is to bring into vision rurality within US intersectional theory. This paper begins this endeavor by bridging together intersectionality and transnationalism via Latina feminist scholarship. Latina feminism contains the analytical scope—via borderlands theory—to excavate the rural into intersectionality’s purview. Latina feminist thought, which spans the Global North and South, critically engages with the geographic, political, and cultural borders that delineate nation–states, thus lending itself to a transnational alliance that reveals “unique forms of resistance, crossing, and bridging” (Zinn and Zambrana 2019, 695). At the same time, Latina feminist thought, via Chicana activism, has also contributed fruitfully to intersectionality’s genealogy of critical praxis and inquiry in the United States. Latina feminisms, therefore, embody an insider/outsider position within intersectional epistemology by virtue of its Global North and Global South locality. Latina feminisms “maintain a transnationalism” (Zinn and Zambrana, 694) in their analyses of

power and subjectivity, allowing it to account for women of color within and beyond Euro-American societies.

By calling attention to Latina feminist scholarship, this paper seeks to fruitfully bridge together intersectionality and transnationalism as generative and mutually constitutive analytical frameworks (Falcón and Nash 2015) that provide rich dialogue and complex analyses of subjectivity, structures of domination, and context. To this end, I do not propose to conceptualize US intersectional feminisms and Latina transnational feminisms as being antithetical to one another, but instead, call for the opposite: “By identifying the links, or thinking about the bridge, then it leads us to a space in which we steer away from conceptualizing intersectionality and transnationalism as competing and binary logics but rather as politically complementary” (Falcón and Nash 2015, 9). I turn to Latina transnational scholarship to begin this bridging of intersectionality and transnationalism via the rural. To this end, I frame Latin American scholars Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Gloria González-Lopéz as generative bridges because their work centralizes rurality through critical examinations of gender, sexuality, class, and modernity.

A Bolivian decolonial feminist scholar, Cusicanqui (2010, 2012), thinks critically from and with the rural to theorize the formation of the modern state of Bolivia, as the discourses tied to the rural have direct material and discursive effects on Bolivian Indigenous communities. Cusicanqui asserts, “the initial act of colonization was gendered” (2012, 30), which she notes as a continual process of control in Bolivia’s “modern/colonial gender system” (Lugones 2016) today—insisting that the formation of the nation-state is founded on gender ideologies that mark modernity or “progress.” The subjugation of Indigenous people from the Andes in Bolivia is predicated on the feminization of Indigenous subjectivity, which draws legitimacy via rural in/visibility within Bolivia’s history of modernization.

The feminization of Indigenous subjectivity became entrenched through Bolivia’s attempts to achieve modernization, which entailed adopting a “human rights” paradigm to territoriality. Cusicanqui notes the European colonial empire universalized a “phallogentric” modern subjectivity endowed with rights, a masculine “enlightened heterosexual individual” (29). Modernity then became associated with an urbanized masculinity. Bolivian modernization entailed adopting this patriarchal structure of subjectivity and human relations both in the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the judicial system. This patriarchal structure replaced Indigenous systems of governance, where previously patriarchy writ-large did not exist and was closer to gender egalitarianism with no public/private divide.

However, in working the legal system to their benefit (quite successfully), Indigenous activists adopted the masculinized constructs of territoriality to gain rights to their communal lands, such as systematically cataloging indigenous ways of life. This discursive practice reflects Lugones’s assessment of the “modern/colonial gender system” (2016), which entails adopting Western “ways of knowing” that meet the “cognitive needs of capitalism” by naturalizing identities and places in the service of colonialism’s extraction and subjugation. Lugones states,

The cognitive needs of capitalism include measurement, quantification, externalization (or objectification) of what is knowable with respect to the knower so as to control the relations among people and nature and among them with respect to it, in particular the property in means of production.

(2016, 17)

In adopting the cognitive needs of capitalism, Cusicanqui highlights how Indigenous legal reforms of land in Bolivia reified indigeneity as inferior: “They created a ‘modern’ stereotype of the Indian as rural and backward subject, passive and stagnant, enclosed in an isolated commu-

nity that was therefore feminized as the object of (male) lettered reform and progressive action” (36). Consequently, rural Bolivia became charged with symbolic imaginations of pre-modernity, and as a result politically functioned as a census tool of ethnic segregation for Indigenous communities. Rural spaces became the official designated realm of visible indigeneity, becoming the spaces through which the state could formally recognize Indigenous communities. This recognition occurred because rural spaces became associated with imaginations of a pre-modern past, signaling backwardness and passiveness. On the other hand, Bolivia utilized urban cities to model Euro-centric models of economic prosperity to mark itself as “modern”—symbolized by competitive market economies that upheld individualism over collectiveness. In this sense, Cusicanqui’s analysis of modern Bolivia exposes the nation-state’s utilization of rural spacialization—in terms of physically segregating Indigenous (or racialized) bodies, and in turn, symbolically demarcating the modern state, which Cusicanqui uncovers to be inextricably tied to the subjugation of the feminine, a gendered process as much as it is racialized.

The rural/urban dichotomy occludes the everyday realities of Indigenous Andean societies and other communities who live, play, and work between and across rural and urban contexts, as Cusicanqui notes. Thus, the dichotomy between the pre-modern-feminine-rural and modern-masculine-urban proves illusory yet imperative to nation-building. The borders marked between the rural and the urban shape and inform the living conditions and subjectivities of individuals caught between both spaces.

The borderlands between the rural and the urban have precise effects on Latinas’ gender and sexual lives, as sociologist Gloria González-Lopéz demonstrates. Her Mexican studies scholarship (2015, 2005) exposes the cultural, political, and economic differences between rural and urban contexts in Mexico, and how these dynamics are rooted in the historical formation of the modern Mexican nation-state. González-Lopéz (2005) finds heterosexual Mexican women and men experience changes in their sexualities due to the different gender norms they encounter and negotiate as they migrate from one geopolitical context to another, whether that migration is *internal*—from a rural small-town (pueblo) to an urban/metropolitan city, such as Mexico City—or *transnational*—from Mexico to the United States. González-Lopéz’s study underscores how Mexican women practice sexual beliefs and behaviors that indicate fluid, contradictory, and changing gender expressions contingent on the diverse social contexts they encounter throughout their lives. For Mexican men and women, these transformations primarily occur through their varied forms of migration, notably from rural to urban spaces in both national and transnational parameters.

González-Lopéz advances a theoretical concept of regional patriarchies, defined as a “term [that explains] how women and men are exposed to diverse, fluid, and malleable but regionally uniform and locally defined expressions of hegemony and their corresponding sexual moralities” (2005, 6). Regional patriarchies are “fluid and contestable” (91) due to the economic, social, and political conditions of the spaces in which they emerge. Meaning, gender relations will vary in degree and form according to local geographies. González-Lopéz finds that “rural patriarchies” differed markedly from “urban patriarchies” for several reasons. Because rural towns in Mexico have less access to higher education and market economies, rural Mexican women and men are less exposed to alternative discourses on gender and sexuality. Rural spaces therefore contain more acute versions of gender inequality (rural patriarchies) than experienced in urban cities. Meanwhile, urban patriarchy:

identifies disguised or de-emphasized gender inequalities seen in larger urban metropolises, such as Mexico City. In urban social contexts multiple possibilities for education, paid work, well-informed sex education and training, and organized women’s

organizations may expose women to social circumstances that enable them to challenge gender inequalities.

(92)

Several men from urban spaces interviewed in González-López's study expressed more empathy for women's gender and sexual expectations, at times referencing women's equality as the source for their beliefs, progressive beliefs that rural men much less expressed. However, González-López does not reify a rural/urban dichotomy, where rural stands for "rigorous and restrictive" and urban stands for "liberal and progressive" (93). Instead, she emphasizes both rural and urban patriarchies "are fluid and may be emphasized, weakened, or strengthened depending on socioeconomic and political contexts" (93). Thus, she contends patriarchy is "not uniform or monolithic" (6), but rather, it is always in flux, and thus, subject to change. In other words, spatial contexts shape the degree and form through which people experience heteropatriarchy. Most importantly, González-López argues that Western explications of gender inequality, even if intersectional, are often cursory, static, and have limited understandings of power because they do not include the relational process of constructing sexual subjectivity between different genders (as she does with cis, heterosexual Mexican women and men) across time (pre- and post-migration, for instance) and space/place (between and across the rural and urban).

In sum, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Gloria González-López provide intersectionality with viable and critical frameworks of rurality, exposing the contingent, context-specific, and procedural relations (Choo and Ferree 2010) between systems of power informing gender and sexuality. Intersectionality has indeed procured "critical work on patriarchy," but it has ultimately "neglected a key central dimension: the potential and actual interrelationships of historically and geographically specific patriarchies to such transterritorial and transnational processes" (2013, 848) as transnational feminist scholar Vrushali Patil asserts. In this regard, Cusicanqui and González-López provide us with examples of how intersectionality can critically analyze the US modern state via rurality.

22.4 The rural–urban borderlands

Ultimately, this paper advances a "contextualized intersectionality" lens via rurality. Falcón (2012) employs a contextualized intersectionality lens to adequately assess different articulations of racism that emerged from transnational coalitions between North American feminists located and organizing across different national contexts. This approach intentionally demystifies a universal, decontextual conceptualization of anti-Black racism by recognizing that nationally and regionally informed constructions of intersectional identity categories and systems of power draw meanings and values from distinct geopolitical histories. Therefore, Falcón insists on multiple and co-existing understandings of intersectionality that are not US-centric in their application in feminist activism. Because intersectionality travels virtually and geographically across borders (Hancock 2016), it has a transnational life; however, its travels are not sufficient. Instead, Falcón aptly posits "for the concept of intersectionality to have transnational salience, an awareness of social location and power relationships must be incorporated into its application" (101). More so, contextualized intersectionality can generate "cross-border tactics" that note the plurality of intersectionality and does not assume the scope and experience of anti-Black racism across national contexts.

As such, I argue that we must retain intersectionality, while pushing its limits through a recontextualization of its explanatory potential through the concept of the rural–urban borderlands. Intersectionality's radical potential can be exercised by articulating the relational and

mutually constitutive relationship between the rural and the urban, as well as the borders that demarcate their separation in the context of global capitalist modernity. In shifting the gaze to the rural–urban borderlands that exist within the United States, I aim to shift the gaze of feminist knowledge production back to “the West.” As Mohanty (2003) and Tuck and Yang (2014) propose, all knowledge production should be contextualized within broader histories of Western imperialism, settler colonialism, and white supremacy. This call for self-reflexivity means intersectionality must contend with its urban bias and inadvertent reification of a border historically utilized by the nation–state to marginalize poor and Indigenous people and their lands, having particular repercussions for women of color and indigenous women in the United States and elsewhere.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s theoretical concept of “the borderlands” (1987/2012) opens up space to theorize the rural in the US in concrete ways. Anzaldúa is a canonical Chicana feminist that concretized her own racialized gender subjectivity in relation to a geographical space with meanings that go beyond the physical: the US–Mexican border. She describes this space metaphorically to convey how geographical spaces coalesce discourses of power that inform gender subjectivity. She writes: “The U.S.–Mexican border *es una herida abierta* [it is a wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (25). The hemorrhage of the blood that results from two worlds clashing traverses the myriad of borders inflicted upon us, especially for those of us who inhabit multiple and divergent cultures (and spaces) at once.

While the US–Mexico border can be largely recognized as the border that demarcates the first world from the third world within North America, many other borders exist within each respective location that accomplishes the discursive work of power, dictating which side is “safe or unsafe” (Anzaldúa 2012, 25). The borders set up between the rural and urban, for instance, have been utilized to demarcate neoliberal capitalist modernity along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, and class—both in the first world and third world, though the rural is discursively relegated outside of West (Mohanty 2003). The spatial dichotomization of modern spaces and modern subjects occurs through an implicit degradation of the rural as the past, backward, or uncivilized—as “unsafe,” as Anzaldúa notes about the “bad” side of the myriad symbolic borders we traverse yet are contained by. As Cusicanqui (2010) also demonstrates, the rural becomes subsumed under the master Western Cartesian dualism of masculine/feminine, a discourse of gender utilized to understand humanity as either rational/emotional, mind/body, and active/passive (Bordon 1993), indicating rurality becomes associated with the feminine and its discursive associations. What I term the “rural–urban borderlands,” therefore, marks an existence in-between pre-modernity and modernity, the past and the present, the feminine and the masculine, respectively. Taken together, Latina feminist scholars reveal rural spaces as symbolic, physical, and legal demarcations of capitalist modernity and modern subjectivity within settler-colonial nation–states. The rural becomes a powerful geographic imaginary representing everything that Western modernity *should not be*, shaping subject-formation, lived experiences, spatial mobility, and power relations accordingly.

22.5 Conclusion

Intersectionality must extend its optical purview via rurality in order to account for the fluid and flux experiences of intersecting structures of power existing across and between borders that delineate the rural from the urban. The rural exists relationally to the urban, and so, the borders that render the rural invisible must not only be named in intersectional praxis. Instead, rural-

ity should be reshaped from a critical feminist praxis and inquiry to create generative webs of feminist connections that entail “the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions—of views from somewhere” (Haraway 1988, 590).

I end with a gesture toward expanding a plural account of feminist consciousness and urge Women of Color intersectionality *and* Chicana/Latina feminist thought to see differently with intentionality beyond the myopia of the urban and to step more deeply into the rural. As noted by González-López, these opposing cultures and spaces aren’t monolithic on either end; instead, they exist as fluid and contestable sites of power and subjectivity. The geopolitical regions where cultures manifest dictate the shape, degree, and forms these cultures embody and result in further pluralities of consciousness. In California, Mexican culture manifests in precise ways in urban Los Angeles, differing in significant ways from its manifestation in the rural lands of California’s Central Valley, which is just 100 miles away. These plural experiences of culture are highlighted to open up places of different possibilities, to account for what remains unseen and unheard. The rural–urban borderlands offer a fluid plurality that does not foreclose difference, but rather, offers contingent and nuanced accounts of racialized gender subjectivity that changes from movement from one space in time to another.

Notes

- 1 In this paper, I will be intentionally capitalizing “Women of Color” when denoting the long histories of the multifaceted and diverse feminist thought produced by women of color in the United States. This is to differentiate between the identity category of women of color and their lived experiences and the self-identified “Women of Color” feminist theorists that utilize this term as a political and radical departure from hegemonic white feminism. I specifically draw from Jacqui Alexander’s insistence in *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005) that, “we were not born women of color but rather became women of color in the context of grappling with indigenous racisms within the United States and the insidious patterns of being differently positioned as black and brown women” (9). In this regard, “Women of Color” is positioned as a subjectivity within the United States context, with diasporic and transnational inflections.
- 2 In accordance with Halberstam (2005), this paper will use “urban” as synonymous with “metropolitan” and “rural” as synonymous with “non-metropolitan,” as symbolically and discursively they serve the same function. This function is to create a spatial dichotomy that is oppositional, yet relational, wherein the rural is always-already defined as the opposite of the urban and/or outside of the boundaries marking the urban. The “non” in non-metropolitan better illustrates the discursive positioning of the rural as the negative space that delineates the urban as normative.
- 3 I draw on the conceptualization of settler colonialism as defined by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in their article, “R-Words: Refusing Research” (2014). Settler colonialism refers to the structure of domination that results from the initial event of colonialism where colonizers “discover” and conquer land (224); in other words, it refers to the systemic and permanent domination of land and peoples occurring after the initial conquest. Tuck and Yang provide a comprehensive definition of settler colonialism that emphasizes the interconnectedness between white supremacy and imperialism. They state: “Settler colonialism refers to a triad relationship, between the White settler (who is valued for his leadership and innovative mind), the disappeared Indigenous peoples (whose land is valued, so they and their claims to it must be extinguished), and the chattel slaves (whose bodies are valuable but ownable, abusable, and murderable). We believe that this triad is the basis of the formation of Whiteness in settler colonial nation-states, and that the interplay of erasure, bodies, land, and violence is characteristic of the permanence of settler colonial structures” (224).
- 4 The theory of universal modernity as originating in the West functions as a “structuring and structured” field (Bourdieu 1990) that has shaped subject-formation and economic relations between the Global North and Global South. This north–south spatial distinction reflects “historical and ideological constructs rather than geographic locations” (Bentz and Switzer 2016, 123) conducive to power hierarchies and social stratification. As such, this paper does not treat the master narrative of “modernity” as historically accurate and objective truth, but rather, as a social and discursive field that functions as “a network,

or a configuration, of objective relation between positions” (Bourdieu 1990, 97). Modernity is a field of power in constant motion, in flux, but also enduring and deeply cemented in affective and material ways.

- 5 By “optics” this paper refers to a conceptual process of visualizing, perceiving, and imagining a given phenomenon as derived from “shining the light” on something from a particular vantage point. As such, this framework does not take physical vision as a given; instead, it refers to how we form mental schemas and images of the phenomena we investigate through theory.
- 6 Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016) define intersectionality primarily as a tool that facilitates action, a two-fold framework of (1) critical inquiry, and (2) critical praxis. As a critical tool of inquiry, intersectionality “examines how power relations are intertwined and mutually constructing” (6) and how existing organizations of power produce precise social formations and divisions. As a critical tool of praxis, intersectionality commits to transforming existing hierarchies of power and institutional life.

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23

ORIGINS

Anna Carastathis

“Where are you from?” was the constant refrain of my adolescence. I grew up in the 1990s in a northern city, amiskwacîwâskahikan (in Cree), in Treaty 6 territory, in what is currently known as “Canada.” As an immigrant child of mixed roots, I came to understand—or, rather, to feel—the question of my origins as a gesture of exclusion. Still, the question had an easy answer, which usually quelled the questioner: “I was born in Athens, Greece. My family immigrated in 1989 ...” Friends *born* on Turtle Island who were racialized as not-white had it worse; for them, the questioning is relentless: “No no no no no, but where are you FROM? ‘I’m from HERE’. ‘No no no, but where are you FROM?’” (Kiirti quoted in Mahtani 2002, 79). Official multiculturalism urged the adoption of hyphenated identities for non-Indigenous people marked as “minorities” as a simultaneous gesture of dispossession and non-belonging in the white settler society of Canada. Twenty years later, in a university classroom on unceded Musqueam territory, where I was invited to give a guest lecture on intersectionality, the senior feminist academic who invited me confronted me about my ambiguous racialization: “You can assimilate,” she tells me, “therefore, you do not face racism.” (I am curious, what brought this on? I never said I did.) Still, after a couple of decades of “Where are you from?” the charge of assimilability had an undeniable sting to it. (Misrecognition?) The unstated implication was (since this was “our” subject): “You are not authorized to speak about intersectionality.” (I am ambivalent. I don’t entirely disagree.) “Where are you from?” can mean: why are you here? Are you one of us? Do you belong? Can you be trusted? Go home.

“Whose are you?” is a question that, walking through a village in Greece, a stranger (*xenos/xeni/xeno*) not immediately recognized as belonging, is called upon to answer. I was called to answer it, daily, during a brief stay in a village in northern Greece, where I was hosted by my partner’s family, at the time. As people assigned female at birth and read and erased as lesbians—whatever our own gender/sexual identifications might be—we were under constant pressure to evade the question and retreat into invisibility. I am not supposed to answer, “I am E’s partner.” As commonplace as a greeting in such bucolic settings, the question is meant to elicit an answer legible in patrilineal or, failing that, matrilineal terms: it is really the question of “Who do you answer to? Who’s in charge of you? Whose name do you bear? Whose property are you? Whose property (if any) do you stand to inherit?” where the answers to these questions are meant to align in a succession—a straight-up hand-off—from father to husband. The unstated implication is “Your answer will determine whether you belong.” (I am not ambivalent. I don’t

have a village to return to.) “Whose are you?” can mean: why are you here? Are you one of us? Do you belong? Can you be trusted? Go home.

Juxtaposing these questions, it occurs to me, as my body has moved through nationalized space, from postcolony to settler colony and back again, that the question of origins—linked to the questions of property, reproduction, and belonging—is a particularly vexed one for migratory bodies, for bodies seen as non-reproductive, for bodies exiled from families, for any-bodies who are no-bodies, for bodies racialized as strangers (*xena somata*). Why do I offer these scattered reflections on these two vexing questions: “Where are you from?” and “Whose are you?” They are vexing, if ostentatiously unvexed in the asking, and unvexed because their very asking performs a claim to authenticity-in-place: gatekeeping—border-guarding, even—the “we” of belonging (in the white settler nation, the peripheral village), while projecting onto the one interrogated the perpetual threat of displacement, which is to say inauthenticity. No one, it turns out, who is asked the question of their origins is taken to truly belong somewhere, neither “here” nor “elsewhere.” Only the settled belong, and the settled—by definition—do not move. Roots versus routes. In fact, some displacements have an ontological permanence that we now seemingly autonomously perceive as indelible signifiers of race, whereas other transpositions, tracking the emplacements of whiteness, are racialized as infinitely mobile, which is to say: entitled to settle. This was on my mind as I tried to articulate the problem of intersectionality’s “origins.” It doesn’t quite rise to the status of an allegory, but it does give you a bit of a sense of where I’m coming from.

When I first started working on a dissertation on intersectionality (in 2003), a little more than a decade after the concept began to circulate, tracing the concept’s origins was already a thorny task. Or, at least, *I* found it difficult, writing from an ill-fitting location in an intellectual environment that was marked by epistemic whiteness, namely grad school in philosophy at an elite university in the city of Tiohtiá:ke (in Kanien’kéha) in so-called “Canada.” For my part, I had first encountered the concept of intersectionality as an undergraduate student a couple of years earlier, in a text written by a white feminist philosopher (Meyers 2000) who questioned the compatibility of having/being an autonomous, authentic self with what she calls the “trope of intersectionality” (154–6). Seeking to understand the origins of intersectionality in Black feminist thought, and its relation to previous and contemporaneous radicalisms, coming to terms with how it was appropriated to render racial privilege invisible, became my intellectual purpose. At that point, it seemed intersectionality had been detached from its authorial and social movement origins, abstracted and harnessed, I argued, to entirely opposite representational aims within women’s and gender studies (and in the feminist subdisciplines of sociology, political science, psychology, philosophy, etc.). What has, arguably, since, become even clearer as intersectionality has moved into the mainstream as a veritable intellectual commodity are the extractivist institutions and exploitative relations of production and reproduction that enable not only the appropriation of the concept, but also, which render claims of ownership to it intelligible. In this short chapter, I consider how debates concerning intersectionality’s origins rely on racial capitalist assumptions about property, place, and production.

In the early 2000s, a kind of collective forgetting accompanied the token citation (where that even appeared) to Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s work. Usually, it was the second of two articles (Crenshaw 1991) in which Crenshaw is said to have “coined” “intersectionality” (see also Crenshaw 1989). It’s worth dwelling on that verb, “to coin”: although it means to invent a word or phrase, it’s usually used ironically to show one’s awareness, in a self-deprecating manner, of one’s use of a well-worn cliché or hackneyed expression. Used in the third person, about an act of invention, “coined” seems to preserve this irony, even if, at the level of denotation it acknowledges authorship. The subtext is that if one coins a phrase, it’s a phrase that has been repeated

ad nauseam before one utters it. The attribution of “coining,” then, seems at once to locate an author and undermine their authorship in the same move. The postmodern position concerning the “death of the author” surely animates this claim. In this view, “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative; where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (Barthes 1977 [1967], 142). If all “discourses are objects of appropriation,” they spring from an historically specific form of ownership concurrent with the possibility of punishment—so that “discourses really began to have authors ... to the extent that authors became subject to punishment” (Foucault 1998, 211–12). Yet, the notion that “authors are dead, irrelevant, mere vessels through which their narratives ooze” (Christian 1988, 72) ignores the commodification of authorship in relation to theory in academic institutions, its productive function through which the author—as the owner of intellectual property—is exalted and accumulates a kind of epistemic capital: the author is taken as the “one [who] creates a theory, thus fixing a constellation of ideas for a time at least, a fixing which no doubt will be replaced in another month or so by somebody else's competing theory as the race [for theory] accelerates” (Christian 1988, 68).

Intersectionality originates in Black feminist theory as a critique of subordination within movements that take themselves to be struggling against subordination, domination, and exploitation (feminism and antiracism); as a “provisional concept” (Crenshaw 1991, 1244–5 n. 9) intersectionality effects the transition from single-axis, monistic thinking about systems of oppression that are falsely separated and even opposed in our minds and our movements, to coalitional identity politics (Crenshaw 1991, 1299). Intersectionality, despite being a critique of dominant paradigms within feminism and antiracism, has been represented as the “most important contribution that women’s studies [unmodified] has made so far” (McCall 2005, 1771); the arrival of a postracial or antiracist feminism; and “*the* primary figure of political completion in US identity knowledge domains” (Wiegman 2012, 240, emphasis in original).

Many people argue that intersectionality—as an abiding “method and politics” of Black feminist praxis since at least the 19th century—precedes the term invented to name it (Ahmed 2017, 275 n. 1; Gines 2014; McDuffie 2011). They point to the social movement origins of a concept that was circulating before a “law professor” gained “naming rights” by valorizing intersectionality in and through “align[ing] it more closely with ... the ‘master’s tools’ in the ‘master’s house’” (Collins 2015a, 10). Whether we grant the originality of the concept of intersectionality or not, we might question why *that* concept, and not others circulating at the time (even in Crenshaw’s own work, i.e., the basement), rose to pre-eminence and eventual “buzzword” status (Davis 2008). In this process, not only authors, but, more generally, political agents—Black feminists who have struggled to put intersectionality into *political practice*—have become subject to both “opportunistic” and “punitive” forms of plagiarism (Bailey and Trudy 2018, 4–5). In the first case, their intellectual labor or political struggle is acknowledged, through the compulsory yet often performatively contradictory academic practice of citation. In the latter case, their authorship is extinguished through the wholesale disembodiment of their ideas: detached from their origins, these circulate and are returned to them in barely recognizable forms (paraphrasing Crenshaw quoted in Berger and Guidroz 2009). “Coining” also facilitates a practice of reading and writing that is commensurate with, if not coerced by academic institutions, where the speed, volume, and referentiality of publications are quantitative measures of value: namely, the naming of “origins” through the practice of “citation.” Ironically, an author is absolved of accountability for their interpretation as one precondition of their own writing through the gesture of citation, which is a signpost of expertise in/of authority (showing one’s knowing through citing precursors that constitute the “field”). Citation, in this hollow sense, is a practice of “hailing and failing”

simultaneously (Bilge 2013, 407). Hence, the “rhetorical strategy of mentioning one African American woman [Crenshaw] as intersectionality’s foremother fosters a collective ritual that legitimates this particular origin story” (Collins 2015a, 10). Citation is a calculus of value. Thus, it is understandable that systematically disvalued authorial voices should intervene in the politics of citation to contest epistemic violence (Dotson 2011), including through calls to “cite Black women” (Cite Black Women Collective n.d.).¹ Such contestations aim to retrieve the means of representation and counter the pervasive “epistemology of ignorance” (Mills 1997, 18), which engenders the experience of “speaking into the void” (Crenshaw 2011, 228; see May 2014).

The “flattening” (Fine quoted in Berger and Guidroz 2009, 70) of intersectionality, its being rendered unrecognizable, may be due to a shallow or hollow practice of citation as the substitute or the alibi for deep listening. It is tempting (I have found it tempting) to juxtapose this with a practice of “close reading.” “Closeness,” for me, signifies not fidelity, which is a patriarchal norm tied to ownership and obedience. Fidelity, in sonic terms, refers to how accurately a copy reproduces its source. But reproduction is not the aim of close reading either. Neither is it to stake the authoritativeness of one’s own hermeneutic creativity (one’s handle on the truth of the text) beyond dispute. I prefer to think of what’s “close” in close reading as a practice of coming, and holding close; it is political, and thoroughly dangerous, to the extent that doing it means entering into a world that is not one’s own (which writing, especially in the intellectual tradition of Black/Indigenous/women of color feminisms, in some sense always invites you to do), unsettling you even in the experience of recognition (Lugones 1987). In that sense, close reading is motivated by a yearning for intellectual and political community, or coalition, which is constituted in and through solidarity, rather than exclusionary norms of belonging: not “where are you from?” and “whose are you?” but “where do you stand?” and “with whom?” Still, close reading is, let’s face it, a practice that I have been disciplined into by studying philosophy, where it functions as a regulative ideal. Thus, critiques of “intersectional originalism” (Nash 2015) that render close reading suspect as an approach because it can be used to assert privileged access to and authority over the “singular meaning” of a text are well taken, because the dominant use of close reading as exegesis, is, more often than not, about dominance.

The embattled question of the concept’s origins lies, whether implicitly or explicitly, at the heart of several current debates about intersectionality: the legitimacy of intersectionality’s “travels” versus its intellectual roots. Its identity politics—or, its normative subjects—versus its analytic flexibility—or, its capaciousness understood as a function of its ability to “shed Black women” (Nash 2014, 46). Its proprietary ownership versus its “stewardship” and responsible use (Hancock 2016; Hancock Alfaro 2020; Cole 2020; Moradi and Grzanka 2017). Cyborg versus goddess (Puar 2012).² In the early 2010s, I tried to think through intersectionality from a still different location, working at a public university in Tovaangar (in Tongva), in what is now known as the “United States.” During this time, intersectionality’s origins, impetus, and transformative potential began to be reclaimed (see Cho et al. 2013; Carbado et al. 2013). In this moment, Crenshaw and her collaborators reflected that “some of what circulates as critical debate about what intersectionality is or does reflects a lack of engagement with both originating and contemporary literatures on intersectionality” (Cho et al. 2013, 788). Intersectionality, during the 2010s, became established not only as a burgeoning field of study with Crenshaw as its foundational theorist but as a viral internet meme: “My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit” (Dzodan 2011).³ By the mid-2010s, a number of critiques had emerged, charging the mainstreaming (Dhamoon 2011); institutionalization and whitewashing (Bilge 2013); colonization (Alexander-Floyd 2012); or gentrification (Collins 2015b, 2019) of intersectionality by (white) feminist academics and by institutional diversity management projects alike (as universities and other institutions began to mandate “Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion” policies;

see Ahmed 2012). As intersectionality became an institutionalized paradigm in academic feminism (Nash 2018), it fell prey to “neoliberal demands for branding, product differentiation, and emphasizing novelty” in the knowledge economy (Bilge 2013, 409).

There are various reasons for this, I suspect, ranging from an expression of insidious “misogynoir” (Bailey and Trudy 2018) facilitating the “harvesting” of Black women’s “collective intelligence” (Mirza 2013), to contesting the intellectual property model of knowledge, which emphasizing individual authors over and against collective social movement knowledges. Against the threat of appropriation, extraction, and depoliticization, certain theorists wanted to insist that intersectionality has specific, determinate origins in the work of specific authors, who are positioned in relation to a trajectory of Black feminist theory and praxis, and who have and study lived experiences of anti-Black racism and misogyny in the United States (May 2015). The political impetus of intersectionality—its becoming a “politics of survival” for Black women (Jordan-Zachery 2007, 256)—is, somehow, lost in/to many metatheoretical debates that fail to acknowledge the existential conditions that give rise to the concept and its attendant trajectories.

In contrast, since we are interested in thinking through intersectionality’s origins here, it is worth noting that a frequently heard critique of intersectionality turns on an unoriginality claim: the attribution of an “always already” there-ness or a derivativeness of intersectionality. This critique alleges “repetition without innovation” (May 2015, viii, 104–5). It seems to assume the invariability of Black feminist politics through time (as a function of Black women’s abiding oppression) and the interchangeability of conceptual frameworks (e.g., super-exploitation, double jeopardy, matrix of domination, interlocking oppressions, etc.). Certain critiques of intersectionality have disputed its “originality” seeing it just as Black feminism “recycled”: “intersectionality recycles black feminism without demonstrating what new tools it brings to black feminism to help it fashion a more complex theory of identity” (Nash 2008). More insidious versions of the unoriginality critique, in my opinion, deracinate intersectionality from its origins in Black feminism and equate it with any attempt to synthesize categories (prototypically, class and gender) in order to theorize systems (capitalism and patriarchy) in an integrative way. The claim is that the ideas that intersectionality is taken to name were just “in the air” (Bilge, 2020, 13). For many Marxist feminists, intersectionality is viewed as a postmodern, Black feminist remix of the “Woman Question” of the 19th century. On a view that posits intersectionality’s debt to Marxist feminism (whilst rendering Black Marxist feminisms invisible), the inaugural texts of intersectionality’s “long history” are (white) Marxist feminist accounts of the relation between capitalism and patriarchy (see Lutz, Herrera Vivar, and Supik 2011, 2). Other versions of this unoriginality critique cite 20th-century Marxist feminist debates, with some claiming “the model of intersecting oppressions is an expansion of dual-systems theory” (Lewis 2016, 273), whilst others (critical of this dualism) suggest it is an attempt at a unitary account that succeeds the race/class/gender paradigm, which itself is preceded by radical left, communist, and 19th-century Black feminist knowledge production and competes with contemporary social reproduction theory (Vogel 2018; Bhattacharya 2017).

It is sometimes unclear if critiques of intersectionality as derivative, repetitive, or just “in the air” are directed at the “originary” texts of intersectionality—which are not originary at all, on this view, but more like “certified copies”—or whether they are aimed at uncritical, under-theorized celebrations of a concept untethered from its intellectual and political context. The ease with which this elision and ensuing critique occur is perhaps a function of cognitive resistance: “[r]ather than take up intersectionality’s cognitive shift, it is folded into the already known ... or characterized as *passé*” (May 2014, 106). But it is worth asking: does the desire for an origin story always fall into the hermeneutic trap of the already known, the familiar (if not familial), the settled/settling, the reproductive logics through which we understand continuity,

debt, property, naming, and even inspiration (“in the air”)? Do the debates around intersectionality’s origins reveal the fungibility, natal alienation, placelessness, and very eviction of Black people from the category of “human” that, for Afropessimists, is the structural and ontological condition of anti-Blackness (Bilge 2020, 18)? By engaging the controversies surrounding origin stories of intersectionality, my broader interest is to locate the assumption that what links intellectual generations and underpins generative theory is not only the valorization of intellectual property through fetishization of authorship, but also of reproduction (in which concepts of “care” and “stewardship” also arguably take part), as a genre of genealogy and of racialized gender. Authorship, authority, and authenticity are entangled in a circuit of value, in and through which the politics of citation (amongst other questions of epistemic violence in hermeneutic and political practice) emerge.

The amenability of intersectionality to a range of research agendas that “disappear Black women” (Alexander-Floyd 2012) is surely a problem for and in intersectionality studies, as is the totalization by intersectionality of Black feminism, its construction as the sole contribution Black feminist theory has to make (see Nash 2018; Carbado 2013): “although intersectionality was coined to counter the disembodiment of Black women from law, the challenge today is to resist the disembodiment of Black women from intersectionality itself” (Crenshaw 2014). This, as a function of intersectionality’s mainstreaming, or its travel from “margin” to “center” has been looked on with skepticism:

While it could be argued that the spread of intersectionality into the “mainstream” is a demonstration of its success and power, it is always important to trace the ways in which concepts change when they travel—it is rarely a seamless translation but often involves mutations that may render the concept devoid of its original meanings.

(Salem 2016, 3)

Something that interests me is how often conceptual “travel” is contrasted to the notion of the original. Travel is itself blamed for the “re-marginalis[ation] of Black women” as some seek to “repackage intersectionality for universal consumption” (Crenshaw 2011, 224). Departing the “scene of the argument” (Tomlinson 2013, 2019), crossing disciplinary boundaries and geopolitical borders, being “displaced” (Lewis 2013): these are seen as threats to the integrity of intersectionality itself. “Travel” is conflated with becoming unmoored, untethered, the loss of origins, the loss of authenticity, and even dishonesty.

On the other hand, as intersectionality has “traveled” to encounter the “local reality of race” (Mills 2010) in a number of elsewhere, the various expressions of anti-Black racism that Black feminist theorists (and, derivatively, non-Black intersectional theorists, particularly women of color, who insist on intersectionality’s Black feminist origins) who elaborated it encounter is inextricably linked to its conditions of reception, interpretation, extraction, and redeployment. Imagined as the safety valve releasing the pressure of deep conflicts within/among feminisms, or indeed the safeguard of a universal sisterhood, or as something which white feminists are better positioned to write about than are Black feminists (on whichever continent): “the original formulation of a theory is not always the most radical, subversive, transformative, and we always need to look at how theories are taken up and deployed in specific contexts,” we are told (Davis and Zarkov 2017, 319).

So, we have established white feminist scholars in northern Europe responding to critiques of academic extractivism by celebrating apparently with no sense of irony the transatlantic “travels” of a concept generated by Black feminists, as it “wafted over to European shores from the US” (Davis 2019, 2), and their own interventions as potentially ameliorative of intersectionality:

intersectionality was not just taken up by European feminists. It was also elaborated in order to address issues deemed important in a European context—issues that had to do with different histories of domination and exclusion as well as the current realities of Europe, particularly in the wake of processes of migration and relocation which are now taking place.

(Davis 2019, 4)

The “travel” of intersectionality to an elsewhere called “Europe,” in a hat trick of racism, represented in the above quote as a homogeneous entity with shared “current realities” but which differ from the colonial system of plantation slavery and its afterlives that Western European empires themselves inaugurated. Rather than claiming a shared history between “Europe” and the “Americas” —indeed, avowing, in part, the origin and collective responsibility—of these histories, intersectionality is attached postracially to sterilized “processes” of “migration” that are now (which is to say not always, or not originally) taking place. Thus “Europe” is represented not as the origin of transatlantic slavery, of settler colonization, of direct and indirect rule—of “The Door of No Return” (Brand 2001)—but as having a “different” history, one which renders it for “European feminists ... unthinkable that an affirmative notion of race could ever be employed as a basis for a progressive politics of identity” (Davis 2019, 4). Such “postracial” representation of “Europe,” its “racial denial” (Boulila 2020) and “not-racism” (Lentin 2020), its deafening “silence about race” (Lentin 2008), function in part by exonerating the violence of coloniality, the violence of borders, and the violence of enslavement, through the euphemism of “travel.”

Writing from an entirely different location within “Europe” —which the Zapatistas, during their “reverse conquest” comprising the first phase of their Journey for Life, renamed Slumil K'ajxemk'op (in Tzotzil), I would like to invoke this renaming to close this brief reflection on the question of intersectionality’s origins. The struggle over origins has, it seems, taken over as the originary struggle in much intersectionality scholarship. But intersectionality, for the millions of people with whom this concept (or, rather, constellation of ideas) has resonated, is about struggle, about rebellion against orders and borders, about abolition and liberation. And these are not origins, but horizons.

Notes

- 1 To be clear, the Cite Black Women Collective does not subscribe to a hollow practice of citation but instead identifies five “guiding principles” to guide reflection and action: “(1) Read Black women’s work; (2) Integrate Black women into the CORE of your syllabus (in life and in the classroom); (3) Acknowledge Black women’s intellectual production; (4) Make space for Black women to speak; (5) Give Black women the space and time to breathe” (Cite Black Women Collective, n.d.).
- 2 These are just some of the positions tracking these debates, and although they are sometimes presented as binary oppositions, like my use of “versus” here implies, my feeling is that they are not.
- 3 I am not suggesting that Flavia Dzodan’s article, the title of which I quote here, was just a meme, nor that it was intended by its author as a meme. Rather, I mean that the phrase “My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit” was made into a meme, often (as memes go) without attribution.

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INTERSECTIONALITY AND TRANSNATIONAL POWER IN THE US ASYLUM PROCESS

Sylvanna M. Falcón

When first introduced to intersectionality theory as a graduate student at the University of New Mexico, I felt a kinship with this feminist framework. I felt it offered clarity about the liminal space so many Black women and other women of color experienced and, more importantly, challenged the siloization of identities that left one feeling incomplete or partially understood. To apply an intersectionality framework to an analysis of institutions, systems, and structures clarified what so many of us women of color understood intrinsically—that these entities were not created with our subjectivities in mind and as such, they wield incredible power over our lives precisely because they exclude our very existence.

During my graduate studies at the University of New Mexico, I volunteered at an immigration clinic in downtown Albuquerque, assisting the attorney in processing cases related to the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) for immigrant women. As these abused women sought some form of protection in the United States from their intimate partner violence situation, we would hear their testimonies and compile the information needed to submit the request. Although the attorney and I had very strong critiques of this process that relied on the exhausting trope of the United States as savior and everywhere else in Latin America as oppressive, we had no choice if we really wanted these battered women, sometimes with US-born children, to have a chance at receiving asylum. There was a time factor in which we could not challenge a legal system built on its own sense of superiority. It was a daily exercise of the white savior complex par excellence from a legal and institutional standpoint. In this situation, a legal process that tried to include immigrant women simultaneously erased their complex personhood in which they could only be viewed as super-victims and the United States could only be described as super-savior (Gordon 2008, 4).¹

When Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal works on intersectionality started circulating in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (Crenshaw 1991), she effectively demonstrated the ways in which laws erase Black women, specifically as race-informed law was gender-blind and gender-based law was race-blind. As she wrote,

[F]or feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for

translating “women's experience” or “the Black experience” into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast.

(Crenshaw 1989, 140)

Crenshaw was deeply concerned that Black women—and by extension women from other racialized groups—were in legal limbo, and erased in legal discourses and cases.

In referring to “the anomalies created by crosscurrents of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw 1989, 155), Crenshaw is ultimately underscoring how the lack of nuance and complexity affected Black women so deeply, that their experiences were literally being erased from legal precedents. “[T]he various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color” (Crenshaw 1991, 1296) are handled problematically in legal policies pertaining to asylum seekers. For instance, the undocumented immigrant women we were trying to help in Albuquerque, with absolutely no guarantees they would be granted asylum no matter how horrific or gruesome their plight, even if they were the mothers of US-born children, meant that explaining their situation did not allow for any nuance whatsoever. In some of their cases, the United States was as oppressive a culture as the one they migrated from, or they migrated after being forcibly displaced due to US military interventions in Latin America or other foreign policies. They believed US police officers would not hesitate to call immigration authorities to have them deported, forever being separated from their children. Therefore, the risks they encountered are two-fold: (1) the looming threat that exists when escaping an abusive situation and (2) living in a vulnerable state in the United States, due to being undocumented.

Bolivian activist-scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, in reference to the hegemony of the modern nation, argues that “the modernizing discourse of the elites only served to mask their archaic processes of cultural and political conservatism, which reproduces and renews the colonial condition throughout society” (Cusicanqui 2012, 100; see also Cusicanqui 2010). The US asylum process is infused with reproducing the colonial conditions as an applicant is literally required to reify ethnocentric or xenophobic tropes about their home country. It presumes that the creation of the modern nation, known today as the United States, had no specter of colonial and racial violence.

This essay considers how the institutional power that is part of the US asylum process for claims of gender-based violence undermines intersectionality even though this particular legal process is meant to “see women.” By exploring the asylum application quandary for cases of gender-based violence specifically, I discuss the process of drafting a declaration and explain how it relies on colonial logics to have any persuasion with a review committee. As feminist scholars, we must ask how spaces of convergence—a US legal process and a lived experience of domestic violence for immigrant women—reveal the “renew[al] of the colonial condition” Cusicanqui refers to within a terrain of power in which women’s lives are at stake. For immigrant women fleeing domestic violence, the anomalies noted by Crenshaw correspond to their crisis situation being based on a one-dimensional view of the United States.

24.1 Promoting ethnocentric tropes about non-US cultures

The Tahirih Justice Center is a non-partisan organization that works on cases of gender-based violence, with offices in Washington DC and others parts of the US. The organization developed a guide for asylum applications involving immigrant women escaping domestic violence. The guide lists a series of questions to assist with preparing a declaration that accompanies all applications.² The questions are grouped into eight categories: overview; (personal) background; country conditions; harm suffered; decision to leave home country and travel to the United

States; future harm; relocation and changed circumstances; and discretion. For this section, I focus on the guiding questions about country conditions. It merits mentioning that this guide replicates nearly the exact same format and questioning we followed in the Albuquerque clinic in 2000 when preparing declarations.

In addition to asking questions about the economic, social, and political context of a country, the purpose of the questions is to probe deeper into the applicant's home country in the declaration by implying the possible host country (in this case, the United States) does not also have a domestic violence epidemic. Take for instance this question: "How are women you know treated by their husbands/boyfriends/partners in your community? How common is this treatment?" The answer to this question for the declaration cannot be one in which the applicant situates women's treatment across national context, meaning begin by stating, for example, "similar to the United States, Mexico also has a serious challenge when it comes to eradicating domestic violence." Starting off a declaration in this way will certainly result in a denial. The prompt is leading one country context to be elevated—either directly or implied—and the other to be demonized.

Another prompt asks the following: "What is your community's reaction to domestic violence? Is it tolerated or taken seriously?" Nowhere in the world is domestic violence taken seriously enough to the point of elimination. In the United States, political consensus does not exist in which there is even an agreement that an abuser be denied a gun permit. We have domestic violence incidents involving guns nearly every single week, if not daily; and yet, the prompt implies other communities tolerate domestic violence in such a way that would be "foreign" to a US context. Of course, none of this is supported by the data, and yet, immigrant women are forced to purport ethnocentric tropes about their national country in order to have a slight chance for protection in the United States.

Declarations are intended to "declare" the United States as the safest haven in the world for women, regardless of the data that indicates the opposite. Those reviewing these claims are trained to look for applications in which critiques of the treatment of women in the United States are not highlighted in any way; if this critique were to be referenced, then a reviewer could determine the applicant is not grateful enough to be granted safety in the United States. It is quite a disturbing cycle.

And so returning to Cusincanqui's point about the colonial condition—here the condition refers to a country in need of an intervention from the United States—reveals a paradox in which to secure safety from violence for immigrant women, requires them to bash their home countries. So save yourself by demonizing your home country even if you understand the situation to be more complicated. Save yourself by having a clear good/bad country binary as the colonial condition justifies the intervention itself as a way to reinforce US hegemony and superiority around the world. It is absurd to base one's safety on denying the lack of safety they will continue to experience in the United States, even if that insecurity is not about domestic violence.

To conclude this section, I highlight the third question in this guide: "Do women suffering from domestic violence trust the police and if not, why?" Now this question really merits unpacking. One, it presupposes that the police state will have a role to play in the eradication of gender-based violence. It assumes that police are not inherently violent and that police officers may not be abusers. It suggests that most women should by default trust the police, and that involving a police response is a normalized global response to domestic violence. Police reinforce the colonial condition and as such, they cannot ensure real security too for women. The temporal relief that can be issued in some domestic violence cases involving police is not about trust; it is about a system of policing that could result occasionally in a brief hiatus of violence but is not ever going to provide meaningful long-term protection.

The declaration that is part of the asylum application process on gender-based violence is a deeply flawed one as it not only relies on simplistic framing, but is allergic to nuance or situational context. In no way can the declaration contain a critique of US intervention or foreign policy, wariness of white supremacy or racism, and concern about the prevalence of domestic violence in the United States or the threat of deportation. The applicants' acceptance hinges on disparaging their own country. This is not to suggest that any country is above critique, but given that no place in the world has been able to end gender-based violence should mean that this is a global problem that includes the United States.

24.2 The application of intersectionality to the asylum process: engaging the liminal

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's concept "*Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*" is instructive here in that applying this notion results in an intersectionality approach that is situational and nuanced and can handle contradictions. She notes that "*Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*" is an Aymara word in which an English translation is difficult. Her concept derives from *ch'ixi*, which, she writes, "has many connotations: it is a color that is the produce of juxtaposition, in small points or spots, of opposed or contrasting colors: black and white, red, and green, and so on." She goes on to write "the notion of *ch'ixi*, like many others (*allqa*, *ayni*), reflects the Aymara idea of something that is and is not at the same time" (Cusicanqui 2012, 105). As also stated in the introduction of a talk by Cusicanqui,

Ch'ixi is a principle that allows opposites to stand side by side without erasing one. Non-resolvable contradictions and opposites, considered as »both ... and«, are foundations of this world order: the greater the difference between things, the more important is an exchange relationship between them.³

This idea of duality, that something is and is not, can shed new light if applied to the US asylum application process, especially for cases of gender-based violence in which patriarchy and misogyny are ever present in US culture. In other words, one can be safer in the United States merely by being geographically distant from one's abuser, but that does not render the host country somehow culturally superior. One can be from a community that strives to address gender-based violence at the community level, not through the police, and yet the situation is so grave that safety and security are still not viable, forcing one to flee to the United States.

Imagine if the three prompts from the guide referenced in the prior section were modified in order to reflect the duality that Cusicanqui theorizes. Instead of asking what is common about the treatment of women in their community, the question could be what have been the political challenges facing your country and how have those difficulties impacted the overall treatment of women in your country? This type of framing removes the pathologizing of a community and focuses on the socio-political context that contributes to exacerbating gender-based violence. The second prompt asking about the community's response to domestic violence could be based on the premise that no community has been able to resolve this grave matter. Rather than asking about the community's reaction, the query could be asking in what ways, if any, the community has assisted them overall, followed by a question about the challenges experienced in the community to secure their safety. Lastly, rather than asking about trust in the police, the question could be which institutions they do trust, if any.

The application of Cusicanqui's concept "*Ch'ixinakax utxiwa*" to the US asylum process would mean that the process itself would not have to be based on the idea of US superiority, that it could recognize complex personhood, and the application of intersectionality in this case

would be deepened beyond just “seeing women.” The community which they are fleeing can be both supportive and disappointing; their situation could have been serious but then worsened as a result of civil conflict; the admission that security in the United States is not also guaranteed could then be acceptable in the declaration rather than used as a justification for denying protection. Acknowledging the global extent of the epidemic would lend itself to a US asylum process that is not disconnected from its own challenges in ending violence against women.

24.3 Working toward meaningful security from gender-based violence

Though it may seem unconventional to put into conversation the work of an Aymaran Bolivian woman (Cusicanqui) with a feminist theory that is largely viewed as deriving from US Black and Latina feminist thought, I do so in order to apply an Indigenous-derived concept that thrives in liminal spaces in a non-hierarchical manner. This approach recognizes that abused women seek meaningful security that does not require an application laden with ethnocentrism. It means that the colonial conditions embedded in the US asylum process could be remade to recognize the complicity of US power or, at minimum, acknowledge that an application to relocate to the US is a fraught one since the US has its own serious epidemic of gender-based violence.

I began this essay by noting my simultaneous introduction to intersectionality theory and wrestling with the discomfort of an asylum process that hinged on its own sense of superiority. I then explored how an asylum process that is structured to “see women” who are immigrants and experiencing gender-based violence does not actually see them holistically. And thus, the exertion of institutional power in the US asylum process suggests that the exclusions Crenshaw wrote about with regards to intersectionality can also occur even when women are actually considered; so their inclusion can still be partial and incomplete. The asylum application process is painful and arduous, with one having to recount brutal incident after brutal incident. It is so deeply flawed and one-dimensional that the US asylum process needs to be entirely restructured or reimagined in order to account for the liminal spaces—the “*Ch’ixinakax utxiwa*”—so many immigrant women find themselves in when confronting gender-based violence. This remaking with a deepened engagement with intersectionality would result in a more humane process for abused immigrant women.

Notes

- 1 Sociologist Avery Gordon states, “Complex personhood means that even those called ‘Other’ are never *never* that” (italics emphasis added).
- 2 See “Guide for Drafting a Declaration in Support of an Application for Asylum: Domestic Violence” by the Tahirih Justice Center, available at www.tahirih.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Asylum-DV-Asylum-Declaration-Drafting-Guide.pdf.
- 3 See “Terrestrial University: Pacha and ch’ixi. Andean Cosmological Equilibrium,” available at <https://zkm.de/en/event/2021/06/terrestrial-university-pacha-and-chixi-andean-cosmological-equilibrium>

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25

THE GRID AND THE MAP

Intersectionality in migration

*Sherally Munshi*¹

Suspended in Crenshaw's early conceptualization of intersectionality is the image of movement.

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection ... 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 traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them.²

Crenshaw was not the first or last to identify the mutually constitutive character of racism and sexism, but her formulation of “intersectionality,” as a framework for understanding identity and discrimination, remains particularly influential in legal, academic, and public discourse.³ In 2001, at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, Crenshaw was invited to introduce the term to representatives of the United Nations. There, she further elaborated her traffic metaphor, explaining

[i]ntersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group ... tries to navigate the main crossing in the city ... The main highway is ‘racism road.’ One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street ... She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms ... which link together.⁴

Despite the movement and flow suggested by Crenshaw's original metaphor, critics observe, intersectionality has come to designate something like a fixed coordinate on a grid. The spatial and temporal dimensions that animate the collision of, for instance, colonialism and patriarchy, have been congealed in the form of identity, the particularity of which becomes visible, especially within the framework of law, only after an injury. For this reason, critics have argued that intersectionality has become trapped within a logic of identity, continuously refining rather than disrupting the grid of intelligibility within which it intervenes, failing to challenge the role that identity itself plays in structuring liberalism and capitalism, which themselves produce rights-bearing individuals as their subjects.⁵ Categories of race, nationality, sex, and gender are themselves the products of colonial modernity and governance. Perhaps owing to its articulation as an intervention within legal discourse—US anti-discrimination law in particular—intersectionality

remains preoccupied with the rights and injuries, recognition, and representation of individuals. As such, the focus on individual identities and injuries, in intersectionality and equality jurisprudence generally, tends to obscure the role that processes of settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and border nationalism play in continuously producing identities and difference. As increasingly particularized individuals and injuries gain visibility, ongoing processes of colonialism, capitalism, and nationalism recede into the background, placed beyond the scope of review and redress.

In her rereading of Crenshaw's traffic analogy, Jasbir Puar observes that the accident or injury "retroactively forms the grid and positions on it," critically obscuring the dynamic and ongoing processes that are "prior to, beyond, or past the grid."⁶ Intersectionality has become the work of fine-tuning the grid, "producing static epistemological renderings of categories," rather than examining the political and epistemological processes that produce difference and injury.⁷ Here, as I turn to consider intersectionality in discussions involving migration, I want to add that intersectionality also takes for granted a certain map of the world. It is not only that the categories taken for granted within intersectionality are projected "across historical and geopolitical locations," but that it takes for granted the contemporary nation-state form, though it proliferates the very forms of difference and injury with which intersectionality is concerned.

Within the American imaginary, for instance, the gradual incorporation of racialized minorities—Black, Indian, women, gay, immigrant, intersectional—as full citizens is often made to appear as the dramatic arc of national history. But this narrative of progress often unfolds within the unexamined frame of the nation-state. The bordered nation itself appears as an empty container of history, though the history of the nation is one of continuously extending the border.⁸ The violent displacements and disruptions of settler colonialism, imperial expansion, racialized subordination, and border nationalism are naturalized in the apparent givenness of the nation-state form and the unyielding rigor of the border. Where intersectionality perhaps takes for granted the relation between the state and its minoritized subjects within the bordered nation, scholars of postcolonial, Indigenous, and ethnic studies foreground the ways in which differences have themselves been produced by movement and its regulation, through encounters and intimacies, inclusion and removal, dependencies and relation, in contact zones, across borderlands, through transit.⁹

In this essay, I explore the limits of intersectionality as a conceptual framework for making sense of the particular vulnerability of migrants. Because the important corrections and contributions that intersectionality has made to our understanding of identity and discrimination are by now well understood, I do not rehearse them here. Nor do I rehearse the critiques of intersectionality advanced from the left, by various feminists, women of color, transnational and postcolonial thinkers. Instead, my contribution to that critical discourse is focused on the limits of intersectionality in the context of migration—particularly in this moment, as intersectionality becomes more widely institutionalized in public, academic, and human rights discourse. My general claim is that insofar as intersectionality remains tethered to the conceptual ironwork of the nation-state and international border regime—themselves products of colonialism—intersectionality tends to obscure the spatial and temporal dimensions of the social processes that produce national identity, Indigenous difference, and migrant status. Intersectionality needs a political geography of migration. Here, I attempt to illustrate these claims by focusing on three recent invocations of intersectionality in the context of migration—public discussion about recent violence against Asian and Asian American women, the relative invisibility of Indigenous women crossing the border, and the increasingly generalized condition of statelessness in the world, a which perhaps represents the antithesis of intersectionality—not the refinement of identity but its liquidation.

25.1 Violence against Asian American women

In March of 2021, after a gunman entered three Atlanta massage parlors, killing eight people, six of whom were women of Asian descent, the Cherokee County Sheriff explained at a press conference that it was too soon to determine whether the killing was "racially motivated." The killer himself explained that he has a "sex addiction." He had targeted the massage parlors because he saw them as sites of "temptation," which he wanted to "eliminate."¹⁰ The sheriff's suggestion that the killing was racist or sexist—but not both—was met with immediate outrage among Asian and Asian American women who, after enduring an especially brutal year of harassment and violence, insisted there was no disentangling of race from gender or gender from race.¹¹

Intersectionality was then thrust into the mainstream conversation as scholars, writers, and activists were called upon to describe the particular form of racist misogyny and gendered racism they confronted.¹² Numerous Asian and Asian American women wrote of cat-calls and come-ons, of being propositioned by complete strangers claiming to have had a girlfriend "just like you" while serving in Korea, the "split second in which a smidgen of sexual interest transmutes into racist scorn."¹³ Within the American imaginary, these critics explained, Asian and Asian American women have been particularly sexualized, represented as objects of pleasure and derision, hypersexual and submissive, pliant and freaky.¹⁴

These critics summoned a century of stereotype, dating back to the Page Act of 1875, the first federal US immigration law to restrict mass migration. The law prohibited immigration from "China, Japan, or any Oriental country" for any "lewd or immoral purpose." In practice, the law was used to exclude most Asian women, rendering them presumptive prostitutes while supplying the rationale for their exclusion. As prostitutes, Asian women posed a threat to the American family, spreading "disease and moral death among our population."¹⁵ As victims of trafficking, they represented the essential unassimilability of Asians—inclined to extremes of despotism and servility and therefore unfit for democracy. As legitimate wives, Asian women embodied the threat of reproducing an alien race of birthright citizens within national borders.¹⁶ These constructions of Asian femininity would be reconfigured and recombined through the twentieth century, from *Madame Butterfly* to *Miss Saigon* to *Full Metal Jacket*, to reflect the racial and sexual fantasies of an increasingly imperial United States.

But the immediate focus on stereotypes and misrepresentation of Asian women seemed to raise another set of questions. Were the women who were killed in Atlanta the victims of a stereotype? Or were they targeted because they were, in fact, engaged in sex work? The attention devoted to the cultural *representation* of Asian women overshadowed a certain *reality*—that migrant women, and Asian women in particular, are overrepresented among sex workers.¹⁷ Particularly in this moment, after a year of publicized violence against Asians, when "Asian American" finds itself in the midst of a new consciousness-raising and identity formation, the preoccupation with stereotypes and cultural representation exposes a critical, if familiar, set of differences in class and migration status among Asian or Asian American women—differences between the upwardly mobile and those indebted to smugglers, between those who resent being propositioned at a party and those who rely on sex work or sexualized work to escape poverty, achieve independence, or support families at home.¹⁸

Plenty of critics have argued that Asian American, as a category of recognition, tends to flatten differences of nationality, culture, class, and immigration status, while reifying the effects of US immigration policies. The Oriental woman is largely a creation of the Page Act. In the early 20th century, "Asia" was conjured into existence by American officials as a zone of geopolitical interest and immigrant exclusion.¹⁹ In our collective attempt to make sense of the killings

in Atlanta, the focus on Asian or Asian American women, as a category of identity, tends to eclipse the long histories of Western imperialism in Asia, US military invasion and occupation, economic development and displacement, the liberalization of markets, and criminalization of migration—all of which work to channel migrant women into the flourishing but unregulated sex trade. For poor women from places like China, Vietnam, and Korea, there are few roads by which to travel to the United States that have *not* been paved by smugglers or sexualized work. In other words, the figure of the Asian prostitute is not simply a matter of cultural representation but a creature of social and legal production.

When it became clear that we seemed to know a lot more about the Atlanta killer than the Asian women he killed, reporters began to explain why it was so difficult to learn who the women were. Again, it wasn't simply that Asian women were inscrutable, interchangeable, or invisible in the eyes of white Americans, but that their unauthorized work and immigration status compelled them to hide their identities.²⁰ The Asian women who work in illicit parlors are often known to their clients and one another only by their pseudonyms. After trying nearly a hundred women, the journalist Teng Chen found only one massage worker willing to speak, a "Lisa." "Or Tina or Rose or Guihuā 桂花—call me whatever you want."²¹ Undocumented immigrants, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio writes, "work in clever ways to leave no paper trail," and the operation of massage parlors is particularly opaque.²² Among the women killed in Atlanta, some ate and slept where they worked. Others were sometimes ferried away in a Honda Odyssey. A man who observed all of this from a neighboring shop observed, "[t]hey were all in a position where they all seemed *stuck*."²³

Advocates warn that a certain bourgeois squeamishness about sex work renders sex workers, and migrant women in particular, less visible and more vulnerable.²⁴ Asian women who work in illicit spas often have little money, no place to live, no friends or family in the US, and are therefore dependent on the smugglers, lenders, and bosses who exploit their vulnerability. They often move in small diasporic circles within which unattached, mobile women are essentially regarded as unprotected persons.²⁵ Employers control and monitor their movements and surveil their internet activities. Spa workers routinely experience violence, usually at the hands of white men, but few report the crimes committed against them, fearing arrest, deportation, and confiscation of IDs, cellphones, and credit cards.²⁶ All of this—the criminalization of migration and sex work, the silence and secrecy that allows abuse to fester—"creates a loop that feeds on and reinforces orientalist assumptions about the women who work in these spas," as Anabelle Johnston observes, that they are hypersexual and inscrutable.²⁷ To simply denounce the stereotype is to participate in the mystification of the circumstances to which sex workers are consigned.

Finally, there is an irony to the way in which talk of identity and intersectionality tends to reinscribe the particularity or marginality of women of color rather than to provincialize or decenter whiteness and masculinity.²⁸ Robert Aaron Long, the shooter, also has an intersectional identity. Long histories of settler colonialism and empire, militarism and Christianity, global capital, and border restriction are folded into the small windowless room of the massage parlor, shaping the vulnerability of the Asian worker as well as the sexual urgencies of her white male client.²⁹ When intersectionality becomes the primary lens through which we attempt to make sense of the Atlanta murders, we narrow our gaze to the object of "hate," as if through the crosshairs of the shooter's weapon, losing sight of his relation to his victims, the histories and landscape that hold them in place.

25.2 Who is Indigenous?

On May 4, 2021, President Joseph Biden issued a Proclamation on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons, declaring the a day of remembrance.³⁰ He announced in a statement that

his administration was committed to addressing violence against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people and its “underlying causes ... including ... sexual violence, human trafficking, domestic violence, violent crime, systemic racism, economic disparities, substance use and addiction.”³¹ He made no mention of settler colonialism, extractive capitalism, or racial policing, processes which have rendered Indigenous women vulnerable to violence.³² On the contrary, the administration pledged more policing, though Indigenous people in the US are killed by the police at higher rates than any other community.³³ In the US as in other parts of the colonized world, police are often used to defend the interests of extractive industries rather than the Indigenous communities that protest the encroachment, damage, and desecration those industries bring.³⁴

Five weeks later, on her first international trip as Vice President, Kamala Harris visited Guatemala and Mexico, underscoring her administration’s commitment to addressing the “root causes” of migration from Central America. She did not mention settler colonialism, extractive capitalism, or climate change. Nor did she acknowledge the United States’ role in destabilizing the region by sponsoring dictators, prolonging genocidal wars, imposing free trade agreements, and externalizing drug wars. Instead, in Guatemala, she focused her remarks on corruption and smuggling. In Mexico, she offered “hope” to would-be migrants by announcing that the US would help them to remain at home by extending access to credit, encouraging US investment in agriculture, and creating public–private partnerships. She also warned would-be migrants, “do not come.”³⁵

For some time, the rates of women and children arriving at the United States’ southern border have been increasing, precipitating new humanitarian crises in the form of family separation and detention.³⁶ During the Obama years, the “surge” of women and children turning themselves in at the border were fleeing gang and gender-based violence in Central America. These displacements are the culmination of a long history of US intervention in Central America, followed by a failure to integrate refugees, which resulted in the proliferation of gang violence in Los Angeles, only intensified in California prisons, from which criminalized refugees were deported back to Central America, where they would overwhelm their weakened and unstable home countries.

Since 2018, the number of families leaving Guatemala for the US border has doubled; in the first half of 2019, border officials apprehended more children from Guatemala than El Salvador and Honduras combined. Most of these migrants are Indigenous, mostly Maya, from the western highlands.³⁷ On her visit to Guatemala, Vice President Harris did not acknowledge that the recent wave of migrants at the southern border consists of a growing number of women and Indigenous families. She did mention that she was the first woman and woman of color to occupy her office. In Mexico, when asked what she would do to inspire hope in “mothers ... women of color ... [and] farmers,” Harris said with confidence, “access to capital.” Harris explained that her office had been meeting with women entrepreneurs and the CEOs of companies like Microsoft and Mastercard; “we talked ... about ... what we can do to also use technology to get direct relationships with these women and connect them with financing institutions ... growing the capacity in terms of digital health of those women ... It’s called fintech.”³⁸ In other words, the imagined solution to the displacement of Indigenous women is not to root people in place by recognizing Indigenous land rights or redressing the effects of colonialism, extraction, and climate change, but to integrate Indigenous women into US-centered financial capitalism.

Contrast the sudden emergence of Indigenous women into the national consciousness in the United States and Canada with the relative invisibility of Indigenous women crossing the southern border—women also fleeing gender-based violence, as well as the cumulative effects

of US policy, settler colonialism, and environmental degradation, the intensification of extractive capitalism, and political persecution.³⁹ What accounts for the difference? One explanation: Americans have always been more sympathetic to vanishing Indians than the surviving and resurgent. Another prompts us to recognize the differences between the “native” and the “migrant” Indigenous women in their relation to the settler state. The settler state recognizes the rights of “natives” but not “migrants.” Moreover, the United States’ recognition of missing and murdered Indigenous women tends to reinscribe existing colonial relations, affirming and enlarging the role of the federal government as guardian and trustee, protector of Indigenous women against some unnamed source of violence. But the movement of Indigenous women challenges existing colonial relations, disrupting the authority of the settler state to determine who belongs on this once undivided continent.⁴⁰ The Indigenous border-crosser confronts the state not only with her prior and persistent claim to colonized land, but with her original freedom to move across those same land, without dispensation from the settler state.⁴¹

Here, it may be useful to invoke a distinction between Indigenous—as an ethnographic identity, or legal category of recognition—and *indigeneity*, which Audra Simpson and others identify as a way of being that is not reducible to, defiant of, indifferent to colonial power. Indigeneity designates not a new point on an expanding matrix of identity, but a political agency that exceeds the framework of settler liberalism, including its production of difference through its management of mobility. Indigeneity does not stop at the border—but state recognition of Indigenous women does.⁴² In other words, the United States and Canada have begun to recognize Indigenous women as a category of persons deserving of state protection as long as they live in the United States and Canada. Indigenous women seem to lose the protective charm of state recognition of Indigenous status when they cross the southern border of the United States. They are misidentified as Hispanic or Latinx, or by the names of the settler nations that have usurped Indigenous communities of their land and autonomy. In their record-keeping, US immigration authorities do not distinguish between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, though Indigenous peoples—disproportionately affected by extractive capitalism and climate disaster—are thought to make up a majority of new migrants.⁴³ This erasure of Indigenous difference, besides effacing the colonial character of national border control, renders Indigenous migrants particularly vulnerable at the border and in detention centers, where they do not reliably have access to interpretation or translation in their native languages.⁴⁴ Of the seven children who died in US custody soon after the Trump administration began separating and detaining families, all but one were Mayan—not simply Guatemalan, as was often reported. Juanita Lopez Cabrera urges us to say their names *and* to recognize their Indigenous nations.⁴⁵

Indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to both violence and erasure when they become migrants, Shannon Speed argues, because crossing the border often means leaving one regime of settler control to enter another. As the language of intersectionality has entered human rights discourse to recognize the “special vulnerability” of migrant, refugee, internally displaced, and Indigenous women, Speed asserts that the vulnerability of Indigenous migrant women “is not a condition of the women themselves, but rather a structural condition,” rooted in Indigenous dispossession and colonial capitalism, the effects of which have been intensified by processes of neoliberal restructuring that have created the conditions for extreme violence.⁴⁶ Corruption is part of it, but so are hemispheric policies resulting in the weakening of weak states, the deregulated flow of capital, and social and economic disruption that has drawn so many willingly or unwillingly into drug trafficking and human smuggling.⁴⁷

The extraordinary violence forcing women to flee Central America is increasingly described as femicide. In journalistic and legal accounts, femicide is routinely defined as “violence against women because they are women.” While this formulation may be an important corrective to

human rights discourse, which has failed to recognize the systemic character of gender-based violence, it tends to essentialize gender-based violence while obscuring its political and economic determinants.⁴⁸ In journalistic accounts of femicide, the unfathomable numbers of dead and disappeared women, the pornographic focus on the violation and mutilation of women's bodies often renders the phenomenon an extreme form of machismo or a seemingly natural or inevitable form of gender or sexuality.⁴⁹ The producers of *Disappearing Daughters*, for instance, open their otherwise powerful *testimonio* by suggesting that "femicide ... transcends borders," unhelpfully casting murderous violence against women as a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon, when in fact, the extraordinary violence that they document, in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, is very much bound up with the border.⁵⁰

Crowned the murder capital of the world more than a decade ago, Juarez is the largest border town in Mexico, separated from El Paso, Texas by the Rio Grande. Since the 1970s, it has been the site of a global manufacturing boom, accelerated in the 1990s with the implementation of NAFTA. Juarez is now home to more than 300 *maquilas*, where people from all over Mexico, many of them uprooted by the economic and social disruptions wrought by NAFTA, come to work for low wages manufacturing car parts, TVs, and air conditioners for foreign companies and consumers.⁵¹ The *maquilas* now employ more than 300,000 workers, but the influx of workers has outpaced the development of critical infrastructure. In parts of the city, there is no running water or electricity. Many workers, earning low wages with few benefits, live in the crowded informal settlements that have sprung up along hillsides—slums.⁵² Rapid but uneven development along the border has created conditions for organized crime, political corruption, and violence with impunity.

Women and girls, who now make up more than half of *maquila* workers, commute to work, walking along unpaved roads and across open fields where they are bound to cross paths with violence. Since NAFTA was signed, 400 women are believed to have been murdered, and another 4,000 have disappeared.⁵³ These women have been murdered or disappeared not simply "because they are women." Here, a reconceptualization of intersectional violence, as a violence embedded in political geography, has the potential to reanimate Crenshaw's original metaphor. The encounter with violence and resulting injury are conditioned not only by racism and sexism but a range of political and economic practices that consign *maquila* workers to devaluation and death. Intersectional violence, in this sense, is the failure to provide safe transit. It is the result of a lack of infrastructure, which is itself structured by international trade agreements.⁵⁴ It is the result of the crime and corruption that proliferates in the shadows of the border economy.

In 2001, after the bodies of eight women were found in an abandoned cotton field, three mothers filed a petition with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, arguing that the state of Mexico had failed to protect their daughters' human rights. Eight years later, in a historic decision, the Court recognized that the killings were not isolated crimes, as the Mexican government asserted, but part of a larger pattern of systemic violence against women.⁵⁵ In *Gonzalez et al. v. Mexico*, also known as the "Cotton Field case," the Court embraced the language of "femicide" for the first time, but offered relatively little analysis of the particular social and economic disruptions that have rendered Juarez, as Cecilia Balli puts it, "a city of death."⁵⁶ Instead, the Court focused its analysis on the ways in which "gender stereotypes" and "patriarchal attitudes" interfere with the proper policing, investigation, and adjudication of violence against women.

The case was heralded as an important breakthrough for recognizing the particularity of gender-based violence.⁵⁷ But, as Lorena Sosa observes, in the Cotton Field case, the Court missed an opportunity to bring intersectional analysis into its discussion of femicide. The Court acknowledged that the women most vulnerable to death and disappearance in Juarez are young and "of humble origin" but failed to explore how these "other categories of difference" like class

or migrant status intersect, interact, or compound vulnerability.⁵⁸ But expanding the recognized “grounds” of discrimination, or categories of stereotypes, still does not go far enough in making sense of what is happening in Juarez. To make sense of violence in Juarez, we need to turn our attention from identity to the social processes that produce difference and differential exposure to death. A number of scholars, artists, and activists now refer to the murders as “maquila murders” rather than femicide, underscoring the role that free trade and industrialization, migration and social upheaval, the devaluation of women’s work, and poverty have played in rendering women in Juarez vulnerable to violence.⁵⁹ The photographer Julian Cardona has explained, “the city *manufactures* death. The main product here is death.” The devaluation of a *maquila* worker in Juarez begins long before she is cut down by a machete. “It is death for a fourteen-year-old to stand in front of a machine all day with no hope for an education or a better future,” or, as Philip Caputo writes, “[to worry] that her job will be outsourced to China,” reminding us of the way the restlessness of capital ripples disruption across continents.⁶⁰

Women arriving at the US southern border fleeing violence in Guatemala are overwhelmingly Indigenous. As the rates of murder against women in Guatemala approach the highs of the early 1980s, scholars and activists trace the origins of “femicide” to older forms of genocide in the Americas.⁶¹ Settler colonialism, Patrick Wolf argues, is predicated on Indigenous elimination; Indigenous elimination, Victoria Sanford asserts, is always a gendered practice.⁶² Mayan refugees, survivors of the scorched-earth campaigns that destroyed hundreds of villages, recall acts of unspeakable violence against women, including the “public eviscerations of pregnant women.”⁶³ This spectacularized violence was not simply a violence against women as women, but a violence intended to destroy a people, to crush any Indigenous resurgence or sense of futurity.

In tracing the continuities between genocide and femicide in Guatemala, scholars underscore the legacy of impunity: the perpetrators of genocide have never been held to account, assuring new perpetrators that they might avoid accountability as well.⁶⁴ But this impunity also participates in a semiotics of terror, one that the discourse of femicide tends to intensify rather than illuminate. When the bodies of murdered women are left out in the open for all to see, without proper redress, communities are terrorized by the sense that the murderers are both nowhere and everywhere. The powers that orchestrate the violence remain opaque; all that anyone can see is the violated body. The discourse of femicide participates in the same mystification: the obscene hypervisibility of the violated woman has a way of essentializing gendered violence, riveting the gaze, blinding the spectator to the arrangements of power that perpetuate genocide.

25.3 Statelessness

In 2016, the British writer Frances Stonor Saunders published an essay entitled “Where on Earth Are You?” exploring the ways in which identity, at least for those of us living in rich countries, is increasingly constituted through so many forms of identification.⁶⁵ Her discussion did not focus on intersectionality, as I have been discussing it here—as that location of identities along axes of race, gender, class, and so on—but as the accumulation of identity markers that we accumulate, voluntarily and involuntarily, as we move through the physical and digital worlds, crossing territorial borders and virtual thresholds.

What she calls the “verified self” is the civic self or identity secured through recognition by the state. It is the identity fixed by passports, visas, and driver’s licenses; we need it to move, visit hospitals, open email accounts, take advantage of fintech. Identification practices emerged with the development of the bureaucratic state but now include a range of commercial rituals and personal routines through which we make ourselves known to others and ourselves, for instance, through step counters, sleep trackers, likes, retweets, wish lists, and impact factors, among the

other bits of biography that we continuously shed into the collected ether.⁶⁶ On the day my son was born, a GPS tracker was placed in the stump of his umbilical cord, evidently, to alert the hospital staff if anyone tried to smuggle him out the door.

Saunders contrasted this accretion of identity, the bureaucratic and digital doubling that is now defining civic identity, with the haunting absence, the unknowability of the tens of thousands of migrants who disappear each year as they attempt to cross borders. If, as she writes, “the self is an act of cartography,” these are the people who fall off the map. In 2013, a boat carrying more than 500 Eritreans and Somalis sank off the shore of Lampedusa. The boat took 368 of its passengers down with it. Among them, 108, mostly women and children, were stuck below deck. They included a young Eritrean woman, 20 years old, who gave birth while drowning. Intersectionality, as it has become institutionalized in public and human rights discourse, has succeeded in making visible the particular compounded vulnerability and burdens suffered by certain groups. But insofar as the grid of intersectionality is tied to the nation-state frame, and remains invested in the notion that rights and recognition are the remedies to suffering, it perhaps fails to apprehend the condition of migrants cut adrift from the protection of any nation or state.

The staggering number of those who die crossing borders and who now live *beyond* borders—who are essentially stateless—confirms Hannah Arendt’s prediction, made more than a half-century ago, that the emerging world system, as it took shape in the aftermath of world war and decolonization, would give rise to a permanent refugee crisis.⁶⁷ As the old imperial hierarchies gave way to a new “equality” among nation-states, the rights of nation-states, which now included an absolute right to exclude foreigners, came to eclipse the “Rights of Man,” which until then, had included the universal right to migrate and repatriate. People have always been forced to migrate, Arendt acknowledged; what was unprecedented in the early 20th century “was not the loss of a home but the impossibility of finding a new one.”⁶⁸ The world was suddenly encircled by borders. “[T]here was no place on earth where migrants could go without the severest restrictions, no country where they would be assimilated, no territory where they could found a new community of their own.”⁶⁹

The bordered nation and human rights, in Arendt’s account, were twin born. But for the one, there was no need for the other. Moreover, because nation-states, the ultimate sovereigns in the world, had no real obligation to recognize human rights, Arendt disdained them as “feeble-minded hypocrisy.”⁷⁰ Within the emerging world order, rights were no longer inherent to humanness but distributed by sovereign states. The “right to have rights” was secured only by citizenship, which was itself increasingly bound to national identity.⁷¹ Minorities who had lost the protection of their state without having gained the protection of another were essentially, as Linda Kerber writes, “non-persons, legal ghosts.”⁷² As Arendt argued, human rights are meaningless without state recognition. They do very little, ultimately, to curtail the exorbitant power of nation-states to injure, abandon, or exclude.

As important to her critique, the subject of “human rights,” Arendt argued was hardly recognizable as human. Sloughed of any meaningful identity, personal distinction, cultural or historical particularity, torn from any sense of place and membership in community, the “human” in human rights was reduced to naked abstraction, bare life.⁷³ Refugees, “once they had left their homeland they remained homeless, once they left their state, they became stateless; once they had been deprived of their human rights they were rightless, the scum of the earth.”⁷⁴ Arendt cited Nazi officials who said that, if the world was not already convinced of the degraded status of Jews, they would be, as soon as they reached others’ borders, “without nationality, without money, without passports.”⁷⁵ Now, as countries develop surveillance technologies to intercept migrants before they reach the border, thus avoiding any trigger of humanitarian obligation, the

“human” subject of human rights is further stripped of identity, reduced to a flash on the screen, a column of heat in the desert, a criminal inciting state control.

Refugees often travel without identification, Saunders observes. Their papers are often confiscated by border officials, stolen by smugglers, or lost on the way. Or they may be purposely shed along the way. Some forms of identification open doors, others tether a person to her place of origin. There is a new word in Arabic, *harraga*, which refers to those who burn not only their passports, but their fingertips, in defiance of state practices of identification, capture, and return.⁷⁶ The only way these individuals can migrate is without identity, without being seen or known by any state. But in 2013, off the shore of Lampedusa, as the boat began to fill with water, Saunders writes, those who knew they would drown, “called out their names and the names of their villages, so that survivors might carry ashore news of their death.”⁷⁷ As the boat disappeared, they said their names. After the killings in Atlanta, families of the survivors pleaded with activists, *please don’t say their names*, presumably because their families were afraid of attracting the attention of immigration enforcement.⁷⁸

As the human rights world expands its framework to recognize new categories of injury and persons—gender-based violence, intersectionality—Arendt’s analysis reminds us that the focus on human rights and identities leaves unchallenged the nation-state system, which proliferates misery by arresting social movement, by consigning people to their place of birth or to conditions of homelessness. Immigrant narratives are often narratives of self-invention, of rebirth. But increasingly, no biographical circumstance—not race, religion, gender, or even class—is more determinative of one’s life chances, or one’s ability to move in the world than nationality, or place of birth.⁷⁹ Saunders writes, “All migrants know that the reply to the question ‘Who on earth are you?’ is another question: ‘Where on earth are you?’”⁸⁰

In her extraordinary essay, Saunders admits that she has no grand theory to explain why so many people are so desperate to migrate that they clamor into their own coffins.

“All I know,” she writes,

is that a woman who believed in the future drowned while giving birth, and we have no idea who she was. And it’s this, her lack of known identity, which places *us*, who are fat with it, in direct if hopelessly unequal relationship to her.⁸¹

I conclude with this gesture because it prompts us to shift our inquiry from one of identity to one of relation. What are the spatial regimes and historical processes that hold us together and apart? What are the epistemic enclosures that render her condition unfathomable? How have the existing arrangements of power rendered ethical response seemingly impossible? My own exploration here has focused on the nation-state, the international border regime, and the colonial legacies they maintain—all of which perhaps intersectionality has thus far failed to interrogate, for as we fine-tune the grid, millions fall off the map.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to the editors of this volume, Jennifer Nash and Samantha Pinto, and to Laura Cahier, Betsy Kuhn, Lilika Kukiela, Allegra McLeod, Moria Paz, Victoria Sheber, Jessica Wang, Robin West, and Tara Wendell for their assistance and feedback.
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BEYOND INTERSECTIONALITY

The geopolitics of race and caste

Inderpal Grewal and Hazel Carby

26.1 Pedagogy: the course¹

In January of 2019 at Yale, we taught an undergraduate seminar, “Race and Caste.” The apparent simplicity of the title belied the complexity of the intellectual journey upon which we were embarked, as the course was to unsettle whatever comforting familiarity the students may have assumed with these two terms of human classification. We deliberately moved away from a US-centric orbit of race, gender, and class and adopted a critical distance toward concepts of identity. It was the transnational and historical frameworks of colonialism and imperialism that were central to our critical focus rather than intersectionality. This essay is a meditation upon selected aspects of this seminar using it as a problem space in which to consider how we found the explanatory power of the concept of intersectionality to be limited for understanding the geopolitical frameworks of colonization and its aftermath.² We do not discuss all the material but for those who are interested, we include our reading list from the syllabus at the end.

We described the seminar as an interdisciplinary course in cultural studies, drawing material from across particular geopolitical and historical contexts transgressing the territorial divisions of the social sciences, sciences, and humanities, and employed a variety of scales to shape its conceptual and theoretical map. “Race and Caste” carried the titles of African American studies, South Asian studies, ethnicity, race, and migration studies, and women’s gender and sexuality studies but was not defined by, or reducible to, any one of them. By interdisciplinary we did not mean drawing from and merely juxtaposing multiple fields usually regarded as autonomous and bounded. On the contrary, we imagined our project as intellectually insurgent, interrupting, challenging, and subverting communities of knowledge created, gated, maintained, and policed by institutions of higher education. Dissatisfied with the ways in which divisions of knowledge into areas, disciplines, departments, and programs remain uninterrogated in the classroom, we were committed to enabling our students to analyze how knowledge and systems of classification are actively and historically produced through political theory, political economy, visual culture, literature, and the history of science.

Ideas of race and caste and the social practices that have evolved from these forms of differentiation between and among human beings are often seen as disconnected, belonging to divergent spaces and times. Analysis of their development and purchase often remains within national frameworks and histories but we wanted to reveal their transnational, world-making evolution,

to demonstrate how ideas, practices, and representations of race and caste could be shown as intimately related and, indeed, co-constitutive within British colonial and imperial regimes of power and US empire.³ Our sites included the Caribbean, India, North America, South Africa, and the UK, locations for considering how economic, political, and social differentiation, discrimination, and exclusion resulted in systems of displacement, exploitation oppression, and violation. We also wanted students to understand how race and caste have been foundations for mobilizing and organizing for rights, resistance, and liberation.

Much of the analytical use of intersectionality has addressed the complex entanglement of race, gender, and sexuality within North America.⁴ While Kimberlé Crenshaw's early examination of immigration was part of her conceptualization of the term, it has mostly been seen as a way to think about Black feminism in the US.⁵ The term has been mobilized in both political organizing and academic research and, since terms tend to circulate and become altered in their circulation, has migrated to a variety of other contexts: for understanding the operation of class and caste, for instance, in the context of India and the Caribbean and their colonial histories.

Our intervention was to bring considerations of mobility and transnationalism into the conversation, particularly by focusing on race and caste as concepts that are not nationally or regionally bounded or ahistorical, but rather are shifting and changing in relation to social movements and political events. Ideas of race and caste and the social practices that have evolved from forms of differentiation are often seen as disconnected, belonging to divergent spaces and times but we argued that race and caste are intimately related within British colonial and imperial regimes of power. Can we see beyond "intersectionality" as an often nationally applied identity category with little attachment to class and turn instead to the ways that institutions produce historical subjects in entanglements that are always geographically and historically both intertwined and changing?⁶ How might an analytic of "articulation," as Stuart Hall theorized such relationality, make intersectionality a more mobile concept?⁷ Articulation's consideration of capitalism and an attendant attention to indigeneity also require consideration as we contemplate a future in which survival across the planet is a matter of global and not national policy.

Through our "Race and Caste" course, we engaged the history of how race and caste became not only intimately related but co-constitutive within British colonial and imperial regimes of power. Caste, a term used by the Portuguese from their own contexts to explain the hierarchies they saw among some groups in India, has come to seem autochthonous to India.⁸ We analyzed how such practices of naming, translation, and comparison of social division were manipulated to enable colonial rule. We also examined how gendered representations and gendered subjects (including authors and artists) emerged in the texts we studied and how gender was central to the making of all colonial and postcolonial classifications. While focusing for the most part on different and related classification systems created by Spanish and British colonial authorities, we traced how they changed over time, incorporated more local hierarchies, and how colonial and postcolonial countries all came to rely on ideas of race. Moving between Britain, the Caribbean, India, and the US, we examined both historical and emergent logics (or illogics) of such classifications, ending up with the contemporary moment in which genetic information about race is creeping into considerations of identity, especially in the ways that race and ethnicity and geography become co-constituted in the projects of "population genetics" and "human diversity." In each history of rule, we also considered how contemporary artists, poets, memoirists, and scholars lay bare these violent histories while honoring those subjected to violence, often revealing how these histories subtend contemporary formations and produce subjects who reframe, revise, and resist those histories.

Words to name and systems to categorize, like race and caste, evolved in colonial contexts. What is at stake in how our bodies are "read," we argued, should be regarded as a histori-

cal and geopolitical question. The residue of Portuguese as opposed to Anglo-Dutch colonial domination is evident in the language used to differentiate bodies and in the social and political practices that either forced their separation, fearing the results of “mixture,” or acknowledged intermingling and its results: the 28 categories of skin color and descent in popular usage in Brazil cannot be easily mapped onto the definitions of “Black,” “colored,” and “white” subjects operative in the *de jure* segregation of South African apartheid or the *de facto* “black” and “white” segregation of the United States. Neither of these systems corresponds to the complex linguistic and visual vocabularies that catalogued the African, European, and Amerindian human heterogeneity of Spain’s empire in the Americas.

To illustrate these visual vocabularies discussion of visual representations of the colonized body as sites of the production and/or interruption of racial or caste identities and differentiation ran throughout the course. The messy ambiguities, contradictions, and temporalities of everyday colonial life were visually rationalized and transformed into conditions of possibility determined and limited by a colonizing eye. Clay, paint, pencils, and watercolor were harnessed to produce visual representations of people in and of colonial order: individual figures were rendered as serial, sequenced; pages of watercolors were assembled and bound into the diaries and sketchbooks of military officers; books and prints were reproduced in multiple editions; paintings were mounted, fixed as trappings, and hung on walls. In these forms, they were not only secured in their places in the minds of the colonists but also influenced local art traditions as artists and local craftspeople sought the approval and patronage of their rulers. Sculpted figures found their place as ornaments standing on cabinets made from exotic woods ripped from the hearts of the rainforests of the south and inlaid with ivory from slaughtered elephants. As Sumanthi Ramaswamy points out, “territorial conquest, settlement and mastery went hand in hand with ocular possession and ordering” so that it is undeniable that imperialism had a “constitutive role ... in shaping modern visibility” (2014, 2).⁹ Classifications of humans by race and gender within images produced by Europeans were central to this visibility, even as it was important for European rule to suggest these classifications were “native” to the culture and unchanging.

Balthazar Solvyns, a Belgian painter, lived in Calcutta from 1791 to 1803. During his stay in India, he worked and walked across the areas of the city that according to Natasha Eaton were known as the “black and white” sections. In 1799 his *Collection of two hundred and fifty coloured etchings: Descriptive of the Manners, Customs and Dresses of the Hindoos*, was published for the first time. He dedicated his collection of “Sixty-six Prints of the Hindoo Caste, with their professions,” to the rapacious East India Company. This is how European colonists were meant to see, recognize, and position those they colonized. In Solvyns’ *Collection*, figures were described, appropriately costumed according to rank, associated with particular objects and occupations, and named in order from the eminent to the lowly.

Solvyns’ etchings did not only capture “caste,” but also what he called “rank,” dress, musical instruments, “modes of smoking,” different transportation vehicles, a section that included “Servants of the European Household in Calcutta,” and, of course, the “Sati” (which emerged as a particular fetish for Europeans). These etchings portrayed figures posed within a background that would provide the broader knowledge that comprised the genre of “manners and customs” image-making and representation. Solvyns’ work contributed to the eager consumption of Orientalist images that were much sought-after in England, with similar illustrations published by the London printmakers, William and Edgar Orme, who dedicated many such works to the East India Company, as was the case with Solvyns’ compilation.¹⁰

The “manners and customs” genre was central to both the images produced by Europeans and also to the many narratives of travel and observation that were immensely popular at the

time. While these images of interiors, markets, and landscapes also were complex compendiums of racialized exoticism and difference, the focus on bodies and faces enables the use of color to show racial difference as gradations of color, white for Europeans, brown shades for upper-caste Indians, and much darker for those doing more physical work. The knowledge that Solvyns obtained from those he met and from the Europeans with whom he must have had most traffic was translated into images that allowed mastery and rule. As consumption of these images increased, they would have become materialized into ruling practices based on racial attitudes that separated Europeans from “natives” and different groups of Indians, including women, from each other not just based on occupation but also through the use of color in the images. For Solvyns, as Natasha Eaton has shown, a focus on physiognomy was about allowing the European viewer to be able to identify people according to what was called caste, and thus enable a “precise” form of witnessing. The images showed Europeans how to recognize racial difference and to fix the difference not only by race but also by caste, thereby positioning the Company’s male officials as knowledgeable about the Indian caste system. As Solvyns wrote:

A short residence in India is sufficient to be able to seize at first sight the distinguishing character of the individuals of each caste and even of its subdivisions. Each of their castes has its appropriate physiognomy, its characteristic features, which it is not possible to mistake. They were strongly impressed upon me, during my long stay among that people, that a look was sufficient for me to decide to what caste any one of them belonged.¹¹

Colonial administrators, the first one being Major Charles Colin Fraser, aide-de-camp to Governor-General Wellesley (1803–05) (Eaton 2014, 58), later employed Indian artists (many of whom remain unknown) to copy and color Solvyns’ figures so that Solvyns’ ideas came to circulate widely among the English. Though the reproductions made by Indian artists commissioned by Company officials often added vibrant color and background to their copies, as Eaton reveals, the addition of color continued to distinguish between Europeans and different groups of Indians, and further concretized caste classification.¹²

As one discourse of human difference, rooted in Solvyns’ visual production of definitions of caste, rank, and skin color in India, circulated in the transnational English-speaking imperial landscape another visual language of racialization with its own particularities emerged from British colonies in the Caribbean. Agostino Brunias, an Italian painter, moved to London in 1758, initially working for a British architect, Robert Adam. By 1770, however, Brunias was painting in the British West Indies also under the patronage of a colonial administrator, Sir William Young, Governor of Dominica. Eventually, Brunias was undertaking numerous commissions for plantation owners and other members of the colonial elite.¹³ As Mia Bagneris argues, though Brunias was Italian by birth and initially trained in Rome, his Caribbean paintings and prints which circulated in Europe, were integral to the racial discourse of the British colonial and imperial project which produced skin color as the primary signifier of human difference.¹⁴

Simon Gikandi and Kay Dian Kriz have discussed how Brunias’ paintings are visualizations of a colonial imaginary of the British West Indies as a tropical environment which rendered people and landscape picturesque: a pacified ecology, denuded of the brutality integral to the colonization of humans and the natural world. In Brunias’ work, the violence, tumult, and disorder of enslavement were repressed to realize in its stead a “culture of refinement,” islands of urbanity with a “culture of taste” where careful attention was paid to fashion in dress, gesture, and poise.¹⁵ Brunias’s paintings are often remembered for their representation of creole and light-skinned

Dominican women but they portray a complex racial ordering and hierarchy of bodies in which gradations of color mark differences that produce a racial vocabulary. In Brunais's reproduction of spaces of public sociality recognizable to Europeans, like markets and dances, a discourse of race is carefully inscribed in minute detail: the lightest of bodies were placed in proximity to the fashion of the colonial metropole, the darkest in proximity to nature and relegated to the corners of paintings with little light. Brunais's renderings of bodies were ethnographically informed and hierarchically positioned in relation to color and shade of color: the most elaborately and fashionably clothed and adorned located in architecturally designed spaces being light-skinned while Black Caribs were represented as without dwellings. The bodies of Indigenous Caribs he colored red and were minimally clothed.

Brunais was a key participant in the British imperial project to secure the boundaries of white identity as he visualized increasingly important categories of racialization that structured the dynamics of power in a transnational British world. The taxonomies mobilized in his work were central to the wider Enlightenment project of racialization.

If there is a tendency to assume that "race" pertains to the West while "caste" describes South Asia, that division is historically blurred by the history of "Casta" paintings from Mexico. What we brought to the class was the history of the term "caste" as it circulated in Europe to describe the colonial classifications that enabled Spanish rule in Mexico. In discussions about the Casta paintings, aided by the scholarly research of Ilona Katzew and Rebeca Earle, we learned how representations of race were central to Spanish rule and indicative of Spanish understandings of race.¹⁶

Corporeal identities and social racial categories were mutable in the course of individual and communal daily life in 18th-century Mexico but in its art form, they appeared prescribed. Casta paintings were visual confirmation of the existence of the intimate intermingling of differently racially marked bodies but also constrained the potential for fluidity from such intimacies. Each painting depicted a man, a woman, and a child in heterosexual familial relations while genealogical captions superimposed the taxonomic language of rigid lines of descent: "From a Spanish Man and a Black Woman, a Mulatto" ("*De español y negra, nace mulata*"); "From a Mulatto and a Mestiza Is Born a Quadroon" ("*De Mulato y mestiza nace cuarterón*"); "From a Spanish Man and an Indian Woman is born a Mestiza" ("*De español e india, produce mestiza*"); "From a Spanish Man and a Mestiza Woman Is Born a Castiza" ("*De mestizo y Española, castizo*"); and "From a Spanish Man and a Castiza Woman Is Born a Spaniard" ("*De español y castiza nace Española*") and so on. Anti-miscegenation laws in the United States and the fears of the birth of "brown babies" in the UK, during and after World War Two, are more recent instances of the long histories of regarding such intimacies as a threat to social order.¹⁷

This genre of 18th-century paintings, which presented gradations of color shown through the images of families, in which a man, woman, and child would all be of a different complexion, also told the story of sexuality and colonial presence. Rebecca Earle argues that the paintings derived notions of classification from the idea of classification within science, as artists captured the variety of bodies. Yet both white and Black bodies were marked in relations of power, even as many hybrid bodies were differentiated in myriad ways. Color mattered to differentiate, but also to provide images of interracial sexuality and what Earle describes as "the interconnections between pleasure and control."¹⁸

Natasha Tretheway's 2012 work, *Thrall*, begins with ekphrastic poems about the Casta paintings, producing a longer historical narrative of what she sees as the enduring power, fascination, and unequal relations of what has been seen as "racial mixing."¹⁹ Tretheway speaks of her life as the daughter of a white man and a Black woman—the "crossbreed" daughter, that is part of the history of colonialism and its forms of power. Through the series of poems on her relation to her

father, the Casta painting tradition, and the history of Sally Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson, she presents race as constitutive of the Enlightenment and its fascination with taxonomy as science, which came to produce racial differences that were policed with violence and with violent effects. What emerged from Trethewey's poetry was the personal and powerful emotion of being herself the "mixed-race" figure that unsettled racial divisions, but whose pain was also part of that history of the ways in which Spanish and American rule was enabled by the violent logics of scientific classification. Reading Trethewey, we cannot subsume the "mixed-race" figure as an "intersectional" one, precisely because of its particularity as "mixed-race."

The complexity of these racial logics and hierarchies was a good segue into Josefina Saldana-Portillo's powerful book, *Indian Given*, which decenters the United States and provides an alternative context for comprehending the racial formation of the Americas.²⁰ Saldana-Portillo traces how early colonial debates about the nature of the "human" focused on the "Indian" producing formulations of race and formations of racialized communities across Spanish and American empires. Saldana-Portillo's text gave our students a vastly expanded vantage point from which to consider and critique the complex origins of contemporary ideas of race in the US and Mexico beyond the binary of Black and white which exclude considerations of indigeneity.

If an important project of the course was to understand how taxonomies and classifications and comparisons were central to colonial rule, then we had to illustrate the myriad ways in which ideas of race and caste were harnessed for this purpose. From sociologist Oliver Cox to the subaltern studies historian Gyan Pandey to Isabel Wilkerson's recent book, *Caste*, the comparison between race and caste has been a recurring discussion.²¹

Caste differences and race differences became central to British colonial rule, which reified and reproduced what we call "the caste system," from employing people in particular occupations seen to be fitting to their "caste," to laws governing property, to how colonial cities were policed and built. If the Portuguese began their rule in western India by calling their perception of group differences caste, the British brought their particular racial ideology to building on this concept and using such differences for governance. In doing so they altered all sorts of relations between people, and changed caste practices and the production of caste, to the extent that the debate about caste in scholarly work is as much about the construction of caste in colonial India as it is about the violence of "the caste system" as it continues into the violence of the postcolony. Under colonial violence, caste became a character of Indianness, in another profoundly racial designation, seen as unchanging and primordial, even though it was malleable and contingent in practice as people struggled to accommodate themselves to the authority of white men and colonial rule. Solvyns' images provided evidence for this process, as he constructed groups and classifications that came to be reified in new ways under colonialism. It is this project of governance and control, one that becomes hegemonic and also postcolonial, that is often overlooked in understanding intersectionality as a construct of resistance and identity. It was important for our students to learn that independence from British colonial rule did not remove the pernicious violence of the caste system or end the continued predations upon Indigenous communities, as the advent of the democratic nation-state took away their lands and livelihoods to build dams and cities.

It is with attention to race as a project of rule that we began this class and we continued the focus on caste as represented by Europeans that relied on large and small differences and hierarchies. We read about caste broadly as it is understood, in both social science and popular understanding—the difference between those who have a caste identity and belong to the four "varnas" (main caste groups) and those seen as "outcaste", i.e., those groups known as Dalits. It was important for the seminar to understand the existence of numerous and changing caste groups and subgroups as making up what was represented as an entire system—one that came to

be represented by colonial authorities as characteristic of India and as unchanging. The articulation of such a system produced a hierarchy of governance with benefits reaped by colonizers and the patriarchies that remained at the apex: practices of endogamy and myriad rules about cohabitation, spatial segregation, property ownership, and occupation, enabled religion and control (including through violence) over populations, and produced forms of gender and sexuality. It was essential that each class and division understood the formation of an entire system of classification under the name of caste that came to control social and political life.

Women of the privileged castes were not just the only victims, since the violence of the system was most felt by those most marginalized, and whose abjection was seen as unchanging: those who now call themselves Dalits. Caste violence by the “upper castes” is now understood as enabling rape, humiliation, exploitation, and killing of Dalits. As Karuna Mantena, the political theorist, pointed out during her visit to the seminar, the logic of the so-called “untouchability” of these groups seems not to pertain when it comes to sexually assaulting Dalit women. An understanding of how colonial and postcolonial power constellates around the concept of caste must account for the violence on Dalits, as well as the multiple other forms of violence authorized by the policing of what are constructed as caste boundaries.

We had begun the course by reading how Dalit activists had gone to the Durban conference on Race in 2001, asking that caste be included within the conference’s remit against “Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance” but were blocked by the Indian government.²² Reading the work of B. R. Ambedkar was central to understanding the violence of caste as experienced by the man who would go on to be the architect of the Indian constitution, but who believed that Hindu India would not shed caste. We read Ambedkar’s condemnation of Hinduism for sanctioning the violence of caste ways and untouchability. Though interested in understanding and comparing caste with racism and race—he was a student of John Dewey’s at Columbia University—he came to believe that state intervention was needed to help Dalits just as Constitutional changes were used in the US with the 14th Amendment.²³ Ambedkar also identified religion, and Hinduism, as central to caste and converted to Buddhism himself.

That colonial rule sought to build on those formations—to racialize religion in their own terms—even as they racialized the entire continents for their extractive power, has been amply visible in the historical record, starting from British interpretations/translations of Hinduism that came from select Brahmin priests²⁴ to the kinds of employments that altered existing caste divisions.²⁵ For Ambedkar, the sanction of religion was the most egregious and problematic aspect of caste and the source of its violence on those most at the bottom of the caste hierarchy.²⁶ As scholars have noted, caste in postcolonial India has not disappeared, and the project of decolonization has allowed caste to continually morph in order to stay alive.²⁷ Even in diasporic spaces outside India, caste differences and discriminations continue, as neoliberal capitalism allies itself with the state to enable ever more forms of patriarchal upper-caste power.²⁸

26.2 Past and future

If our account of our pedagogy in the “Race and Caste” course is a problem space of critical reflection then we also need to consider how our questions were shaped by the present conjuncture in which we, as intellectuals and teachers, are subjects shaped by the transnational legacies of colonialism, the global failures of postcolonial projects, and neoliberal racial capitalism. In an interview with David Scott conducted by Stuart Hall, Hall asks Scott to elaborate upon his use of the term problem space in *Conscripts of Modernity*, where he argues that our task is not finding better answers to old questions but realizing that we need to radically refashion ques-

tions that are no longer relevant and “Since our questions about the present depend on how the historical past is constructed in relation to them, we need to narrate the relation of past to present differently in order to highlight different aspects.”²⁹

Our course, and our description of it, has shifted between a variety of scales of theoretical abstraction and grounded praxis as we seek to radically refashion questions. The process of reflecting upon what and how we taught has prompted us to also consider how we can narrate our own inscriptions as subjects into the past and present conjunctures of the seminar. We aim for a critical narration at odds with conventional dispassionate academic distance, adopting a voice more intimate and immediate that can enact our implication in and relation to the material.

26.3 Hazel

When I was born in Devon, I was designated one of the post-WWII “Brown Babies.” As a child in London, I was referred to as a “half-caste.” Now, in the United States, I am “Black.” I do not know how to mobilize the concept of intersectionality to account for such transnational instability.

I cannot, nor do I desire to construct a theoretical framework to bridge the disjunction between these multiple acts of racialization, rather I mine the historical specificity of each. I also acknowledge and utilize the numerous profound contradictions between my intellectual and political commitments and the location in which I exist. The time between teaching the seminar and writing about it, the era of COVID-19 has sharpened these contradictions.

I think, read, talk and write about matters of racialized, ethnic, and gendered inequities while living in Connecticut, one of the most segregated states in the Union, where access to resources depends upon whether you live in a wealthy, predominantly white, or poor, overwhelmingly Black and Latinx, neighborhood and school district. In tourist brochures, the town is picturesque New England. In March 2020, the rapid movement of the COVID-19 virus up the corridor of I-95 into the northeast was a stark reminder that the entire area is an integral part of the New York metropolitan region and exposed, yet again, the extent to which race, ethnicity, and class are matters of life and death.

I went into lockdown where I remained for more than a year, unlike those who staffed my local farm market and planted and harvested its fields. People whose labor has always been essential to sustaining urban and rural life like the poor black and brown residents of New York who maintain the city, its transportation systems, and its hospitals, were exempted from stay-at-home orders during the pandemic because they were officially designated “essential workers.” Essential workers from New York to Los Angeles were among the first to die. A New York City transit worker commented that he felt they were being treated as sacrificial rather than essential. Across the country, the US health system failed to provide equitable care for poor black, indigenous, and Latinx populations as they had failed these communities for decades. At the time of writing, they had died and continued to die from the havoc the coronavirus and its variants inflict on bodies at a rate vastly disproportionate to their white peers.³⁰ In the UK, the Office of National Statistics concluded that black people were over four times more likely to die from COVID-19-related death than whites.

As the virus spread across the United States, waves of xenophobia and racism traveled in its wake. Labeled the “Chinese Virus” by the country’s president in 2018, Asian Americans quickly reported a rapid increase in incidents of racial slurs, spitting, and physical assaults on public transit and on the streets. Asian American physicians and health care workers experience racism from patients in hospital emergency rooms. This was not a new phenomenon: hysteria over the

Ebola virus resulted in people from numerous African countries being subjected to racist abuse and discrimination; Hitler declared Jewish people to be a virus and the Nazi regime built a machinery of genocide from its racist vision of contagion.

I felt it was important to chart the much longer pedigree of the association in colonial history. In the 16th century, European traders and missionaries carried epidemics to indigenous inhabitants across the Americas: millions died in central America where societies collapsed; in the northeast, a typhus epidemic devastated the Passamaquoddy population in Maine; a pandemic eradicated most of the Wampanoag north of Boston; and the Narragansetts, Hurons, and Algonquins were infected with smallpox early in the 17th century. Designated ethnic, racialized, others, Europeans determined that indigenous populations were disposable and viruses were deployed in the arsenal of colonial warfare: epidemics traveled north and west. Settler colonialism north and south produced a variety of racialized and ethnic classification systems, always gendered, that rationalized the social ordering of peoples by appealing to pseudoscientific definitions of difference or cultural pathology, definitions which were institutionalized, policed and, of course, vigorously contested.

I turn to the task of posing a different set of questions, a new project that has me wondering what is possible and impossible to imagine in a present of imminent environmental catastrophe. Daily, I find myself asking how it is possible to sculpt the contours of a future when the future, any future, has been foreclosed.³¹

26.4 Inderpal

As an immigrant to the US, I became a “woman of color” and racialized as “brown” or “Asian Indian.” In India, it was my religion, regional, caste, and gender identity that shaped my experience and identity. Coming from a region and community whose men were termed “martial,” Sikhs of the “jat” caste benefited from occupations in the British military and policing, but their service in the British army was erased in the World Wars. The Partition, undertaken in haste by the British wishing to depart, made my mother’s family into refugees in India, creating enduring and intergenerational traumas, and enabling religious and ethnic cleansing on both sides of the divide.

Caste was prominent in our lives because my parents came from different (and upper) castes, and their marriage came about because their families belonged to the early 20th-century religious reform movements that tried to unify Sikhs across castes and differentiate them from Hindus. Yet despite the prohibitions against caste purity and pollution and against caste divisions that were central to the Sikh religion, caste differences remained, maintained by endogamy, control over land ownership, and Partition that maintained Dalit subjection.³² Transgressions of caste were disciplined by caste patriarchies, even as caste—often in relation to class—had fluidity across upper castes. Caste through policing of gender came to be “real” in our lives, as identities and boundaries between castes and religions were being hardened in the 20th century in the struggle between colonial states and postcolonial movements—the biometric IDs of the current moment have further calcified identity, even as people continue to transgress these lines in a variety of ways.

Yet our experiences were nothing compared to the everyday violence on Dalits (and also on Indigenous groups, Adivasis, in India). Caste boundaries were and remain virulent around Dalits, as many upper castes continue to see themselves as superior by their opposition to “reservations” (“Affirmative action”-type policies in education and government jobs) and by rampant discrimination.³³ Muslims are also discriminated against, as are Christians, since they are all seen as converts from Dalit castes. In many places, notions of meritocracy and class, and

the emergence of new forms of labor and work and family recuperate older distinctions in new ways. Ajantha Subramaniam has argued that colonialism “racialized” caste by translating it into “merit,” allowing upper castes into new professions such as engineering and technology—practices that the postcolonial state built upon in the development of its own technological capacities through new forms of control built on caste distinctions.³⁴ Yet this racialization is not new. Modernization and postcoloniality gave older distinctions new flexibilities that maintained caste divides, revealing processes that Stuart Hall termed “articulation” and requiring careful analysis of historical specificity to understand exactly how existing relations become, as Hall described, “active structuring principles of the present organization of society” as a hierarchical one.³⁵

Race in India came to have a multilayered, multiscalar existence: British ideas of race that, on one scale, constructed all Indians as lower on the racial hierarchy of civilizations than Europeans; at another scale, it differentiated among the colonized population through racial logics to determine who would be part of the military, bureaucracy, domestic service, and those deemed as “criminal” groups (many of them Indigenous peoples resisting British rule);³⁶ and at a third scale, built on notions of the Portuguese term *casta*, to continue to place Dalits and Indigenous groups at the bottom of the social hierarchy. British rule, governed by the power of racial and patriarchal notions of “Western civilization” as superior, of European Christianity and patriarchal masculinity as normative, redrew local social hierarchies—and what they understood as “caste”—in order to produce consent to its racial governance and to create bureaucracies and workers to rule, and nomadic groups to “settle,” into patriarchies.³⁷ Laws of property effectively entrenched patriarchies in ways that still remain to this day.

Colonial classifications matter because many have been maintained by the postcolonial state for the purpose of governance, and in recent decades, for electoral gain. In 2014, India elected a government that wishes to deem anyone not Hindu as an alien to the country, and its religious nationalism wants to draw sharp boundaries around identity. The British called “communalism” the violence that they engendered between religious communities in trying to rule.³⁸ These terms coined by the British suggested that the violence they enabled and supported in order to rule was somehow the fault of the colonized and nothing to do with racialization and its classifications that enabled British rule. British patriarchy would not tolerate the multiple gender and sexual arrangements that existed divergently across India.³⁹ As with many postcolonial states, colonial rule and colonial hierarchies and classifications have not disappeared, but have become even more virulent. The Modi government regularly uses violence to maintain “communal” difference; each day since this government came to power in 2014, there are lynchings and myriad forms of humiliation and harassment of Muslims and Dalits, even as the mining corporations are being allowed to thief lands and livelihoods from Indigenous groups.

With the coming of the pandemic, the Modi government ordered a lockdown in March 2020, forgetting that millions live on the streets and thousands of millions more are rural migrants who share dwellings where social distancing is impossible. While the upper classes—often those who belong to privileged upper castes—could distance in their houses, the urban poor and labor migrants—many Dalit, Muslim, and landless—were left to return to their villages, to which they took the virus. Such a policy disconnect with the lives of ordinary people caused untold upheaval and suffering, as many tried to return to their villages because they had no jobs, no place to go, and no homes. It was not just Dalits who suffered, but all those marginalized in the neoliberal economy. The concept of “social distancing,” it was clear, was a Western-centric and racialized project of the emergence of Eurocentric public health, unrelated to the lives of most people on the planet at this historical juncture, but one used by the Modi government in its eager embrace of Western technologies of rule. Adding to the misery was the government’s decision to cease running trains and buses, as these millions began to walk back to their villages,

relying on the charity of those they encountered to be able to survive; dramatic images of suffering millions walking hundreds of miles to their villages revealed a government indifferent to their suffering. What also became visible was a new constraint on labor mobility through radical exclusion from urban space. Once again, a Global North public health idea, adopted by an indifferent postcolonial state, created havoc in the lives of many in the Global South. As sick people flooded into hospitals in Delhi, even the wealthy could not access oxygen for their failing lungs, and their cries for help, amplified on social media because many belonged to the urban educated classes, created a public relations crisis for the Modi government.

There is little doubt that the lack of reliable information about the number of infections and the lack of healthcare for most people in India is covered up by a right-wing government. What is clearly evident is that in many places, including the US, UK, and India, governments not only failed in addressing the pandemic, but they used the pandemic to produce new ways to divide and classify people between those who can “socially distance” and those who cannot, between the “essential workers,” most of whose low pay and difficult work conditions made them expendable, and those more highly paid who can work from home, between those who have access to healthcare and even those whose deaths and illnesses are not included in the counts of those infected with COVID-19. Women suffered inordinately, from increased rates of domestic violence recorded in the Global North to job loss among women who had to turn to child care when schools were shut. Even designations such as “essential work” and “essential worker” used in the US to resignify the value of work that could not “socially distance” have not led to any dramatic change in the remuneration or conditions of such work. Women’s labor is especially devalued, even as it is deemed “essential,” and the labor of those women belonging to groups in racial and caste hierarchies is even more devalued even as their lives have been put at risk because they are unable to “social distance.”

26.5 Beyond intersectionality

The emergence of what the WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus called “vaccine apartheid” compounds the misery of the pandemic, as some wealthy countries can open up their economies because of their technological power, and their citizens can travel and gather without fear of dying or with the certainty that medical care has come to be available to them. Yet even the concept of “vaccine apartheid” does not account for the predations of northern pharmaceutical industries, which have now been joined by Indian ones that had previously been the source of many vaccines for the Global South. A reliance on vaccines is no solution to the long-term reduction of welfare and healthcare that has been the result of global neoliberal policies; India, for instance, spends a paltry amount that is just over 1 percent of GDP on healthcare (Oxfam, India 2015 report), while spending almost 3 percent on defense (ranked third in the world in military expenditure).⁴⁰ While histories of empire in different spaces have created the particularities of class, caste, race, and gender that produce apathy about the suffering of so many by ruling groups in many places, decolonized nation-states, wracked by continued imperial capitalism on the one hand and corrupt ruling elites on the other, now have populations who no longer believe in modernity or democracy. Authoritarian colonial rule is, in many regions, now creating new national authoritarians, propped up by capitalism and racism. Whether intersectional analysis captures this mobility of classifications and specificity of history and place remains to be seen, as democracies are increasingly under stress by authoritarian politicians and parties.

Intersectionality’s project attends to a particular aspect of the US context, effectively shearing off domestic from imperial concerns, and methodologically cannot signal the multi-scalar racial project of Euro-American imperialisms. Like another related term, “woman of color,” it came

about at a particular time and space and out of the recognition of a post-civil rights context in which racial justice seemed ever more difficult. Kimberlé Crenshaw's coinage emerged from critical race theory, a US-based intervention by key legal scholars that powerfully attended to the ways that race mattered in US law, that liberal law was constituted through race, that legal remedies could not be fashioned without attention to both race and gender, and that attending to that relation was necessary. (The contemporary caricature and vilification of critical race theory by right-wing white supremacist groups reveals how even that scholarly critique is part of the new culture wars, as governance required for the pandemic and climate change is jettisoned by one of the major parties in the US.) That intersectionality comes out of interventions in law suggests its particularity to the US and its remit: in a world in which global policies are required, intersectionality will have to engage with a plethora of differences and divisions, with racial divisions that morph and divide and build on each other—and which we examined in our course in sections on population genetics and genetic testing—in ways that also engage with capitalism in the new century. As Jennifer Nash points out, the identitarian turn of intersectionality's usage has been limiting in several ways that elide the broader history of Black feminism, but also that some of the critiques of intersectionality in institutional contexts such as gender studies imply that intersectionality is both too much and too little: that it is the future but also that it is not enough.⁴¹ Our point is that it is limited in what it can do, precisely because its model may not suffice in the racial formations and complexes that are not just American, and because the crises of the new century require transnational collaborations and global policies.

Our intervention is to suggest that what is increasingly apparent is that even the terminology of blackness, for the most part, references US-based histories of race: a “black national narrative” belies how a “multiplicity of complex, entangled racial formations were created across the Americas,” ignoring the varieties and histories of that word outside US contexts.⁴² Hierarchies of color and the production of racial differences and distinctions, and the desire to stabilize their meaning to control the groups nominated by them, we suggested in our course, were central to colonial governance. Colonial and post-colonial rule could only thrive if it could adapt and change to incorporate and recast local hierarchies into racial ones, to gain consent to rule through capitalism and more recently, neoliberal projects of racial subjection.

Intersectionality is not sufficient to account for these processes and practices because it is limiting in its conceptualization of race and blackness, as well in its histories of slavery and capitalism, all of which leave out the many contexts of colonial trade in human beings, the relationship between slavery and indenture, the complex manipulations of existing differences into racial ones believed to be unchanging, the complexities of inter-relations between different racialized groups and their children, the centrality of indigeneity and Native Americans in the making of different colonial societies, and the local and regional heterogeneities of hierarchies of the social that subordinate and victimize. The impacts of all these continue, some in similar ways and some under new guises, and in the supposedly decolonized nations of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. Law's inadequacies have been amply critiqued and are evident every day, especially in contexts that go beyond a particular national framework, and its inadequacies are important for national governments that provide neither remedy nor reparation, beholden as they are to transnational corporations.

We cannot depend on legal activism or national policies to address many of the challenges of today forged by European and US imperial capitalism: an imperialism of rapacious extractivism and marketing of weapons that fuel wars enriching the Global North while immiserating and polluting the Global South. Caribbean and South Asian nations reel under hurricanes that come with unheard-of force, and island nations of brown and Black peo-

ple and Indigenous coastal communities are inundated by rising oceans. The least resourced populations were the first to be impacted and displaced by the most extreme forms of climate change—excessive heat and cold and droughts and famine—and Indigenous peoples, north and south are on the frontline of the opposition to the extraction and transportation of fossil fuels. A transnational politics of alliance, resistance, and rebellion in solidarity with Indigenous communities and the dispossessed of the Global South and North is necessary to oppose the emergent logics of the differentiations governing the environmental catastrophes threatening all life on this planet.

Appendix: course syllabus

Race and Caste

Spring 2019

Instructors: Professor Hazel Carby and Professor Inderpal Grewal

Description: the seminar, as an interdisciplinary course in cultural studies, puts into conversation the fields of African American studies; South Asian studies; ethnicity, race, and migration studies; and women's gender and sexuality studies. It draws from the social sciences, sciences, and humanities. Ideas of race and caste and the social practices that have evolved from these forms of differentiation are often seen as disconnected, belonging to divergent spaces and times. This course examines how race and caste are intimately related and, indeed, co-constitutive within British colonial and imperial regimes of power. Drawing on examples from the Caribbean, India, North America, South Africa, and the UK, we examine the production of knowledge and systems of classification through political theory, political economy, visual culture, literature, and the history of science. The course focuses on the consequences of economic, political, and social differentiation not only in terms of oppression and exploitation, but also through understanding how race and caste have been foundations for mobilizing and organizing for rights, resistance, and liberation.

January 15

Introduction: the UN World Conference Against Racism, Durban 2001

Reading:

Ambrose Pinto, "UN Conference Against Racism, Is Caste Race?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 36, No. 30 (Jul. 28–Aug. 3, 2001), 2817–20.

Shiv Visvanathan, "The Race for Caste: Prolegomena to the Durban Conference," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 36, No. 27 (Jul. 7–13, 2001), 2512–16.

January 22 (meet at Yale Center for British Art—front desk)

Formations of Caste and Race

Reading:

Gail Omvedt, *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*, Orient Blackswan, 2012.

Patricia de Santana Pinho, "White but Not Quite: Tones and Overtones of Whiteness in Brazil," *Small Axe*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 2009) (No. 29), 39–56.

Stuart Hall, "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," *NLR* 209 (January–February 1995), 3–14.

January 29

Racial Geographies

Reading:

Maria Josephina Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States*, Duke University Press, 2016.

February 5

Indenture

Reading:

Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

February 12

Caste, Class, and Race

Professor Deborah Thomas (U Penn), public lecture

Reading:

Oliver Cox, *Caste Class and Race: A Study in Social Dynamics*, Monthly Review Press, 1948, extracts Preface, Prologue, Part III Race.

Brent Crosson, "Own People: Race, 'Altered Solidarities,' and the Limits of Culture in Trinidad," *Small Axe*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (November 2014) (No. 45), 18–34.

February 19

The Imperial Metropole

Reading:

Andrea Levy, *Small Island*, London: Review, 2004.

Visual:

Ingrid Pollard, *Pastoral Interlude*, hand-tinted silver prints, 1988. www.ingridpollard.com/pastoral-interlude.html.

Roshini Kempadoo, "ECU: European Currency Unfolds" and "Sweetness and Light"

<https://roshinikempadoo.com/ecueuropean-currency-unfolds/>

<https://roshinikempadoo.com/sweetness-and-light/>

February 26

Casta Painting

Ilona Katzew (Curator, Hammer Museum, UCLA), public lecture

Reading:

Natasha Trethewey, *Thrall*, Houghton Mifflin, 2012.

* Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004, chaps. 1–3.

- * Ilona Kazew, ed. *New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America*. Exhibition Catalogue. New York: Americas Society Art Gallery, 1996, 8–29.
- * Rebecca Earle, “The Pleasures of Taxonomy: Casta Painting, Classification, and Colonialism.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 73, No. 3 (July 2016), 427–66.
- * Ilona Katzew, ed. *Painted in Mexico, 1700–1790: Pinxit Mexici*. Exhibition Catalogue. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, A.C.; Munich, London, and New York: DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2017, Catalogue Entries 56–62, 64–71.

Optional readings:

- * Susan Deans-Smith, “Creating the Colonial Subject: Casta Paintings, Collectors, and Critics in Eighteenth-Century Mexico and Spain.” *Colonial Latin American Review* Vol. 14, No. 2 (2005), 169–204. [Focused more on collecting]
- * Ilona Katzew, “White or Black?: Albinism and Spotted Blacks in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World.” In *Envisioning Others: Race, Color, and the Visual in Iberia and Latin America*, edited by Pamela A. Patton. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2016, 142–86.

March 5

Biological Construction of Race

Professor Duana Fullwiley (Stanford), public lecture

Reading:

- Duana Fullwiley, “The Biological Construction of Race: ‘Admixture’ Technology and the New Genetic Medicine,” *Social Studies of Science* Vol. 38, No. 5 (October 2008), 695–735.
- Duana Fullwiley, “Introduction,” *The Enculturated Gene: Sickle Cell Health Politics and Biological Difference in West Africa*, Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Duana Fullwiley, “Contemporary Synthesis: When Politically Inconclusive Genomic Science Relies on Biological Notions of Race,” *Focus-Isis* Vol. 105, No. 4 (2014), 803–14.

March 26

Professor Karuna Mantena visit during seminar

Reading:

- B. R. Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste*, Verso Press, 2016.
- Gopal Guru, “Rejection of Rejection: Foregrounding Self-Respect,” in *Humiliation: Claims and Contexts*, ed. Gopal Guru, Oxford University Press, 2009.

April 2

Historical Connections

Professor Gyan Pandey (Emory), public lecture

Reading:

- Gyanendra Pandey, *A History of Prejudice*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, chapters 3, 5, and 6.

Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, Oxford University Press, 3rd edition, chapter 3.

April 9

Political Mobilizations

Professor Anupama Rao (Barnard), public lecture

Reading:

Anupama Rao, "The word and the world: Dalit aesthetics as a critique of everyday life," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* Vol. 53, No. 1–2 (2017), 147–61.

Anupama Rao, "Ambedkar's Dalit and the Problem of Caste Subalternity," in *The Radical Ambedkar: Critical Reflections*, ed. Yengde and Teltumbde, 2018, 340–58.

Anupama Rao, "Deprovincialising Anticaste Thought," in *The Postcolonial Contemporary: Political Imaginaries for the Global Present*, ed. Watson and Wilder, 2018, 126–45.

April 16

Afterlives of Slavery

Reading:

Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

Visual:

Joscelyn Gardner, *Creole Portraits III, Bringing Down the Flowers*, hand-colored lithograph on frosted mylar, 2010.

Carrie Mae Weems, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*," 33 toned prints, 1995/6

<http://carriemaeweems.net/galleries/from-here.html>

Roshini Kempadoo, *When and Where I Enter the British Museum*, digital print, 2004.

Roshini Kempadoo, *Ghosting*, giclée print, 2004.

April 23

The Pitfalls of Testing for Genetic Ancestry

Reading:

Alondra Nelson, "The social life of DNA: racial reconciliation and institutional morality after the genome," *The British Journal of Sociology* Vol. 69, No. 3 (2018), 522–35.

Alondra Nelson, "Elizabeth Warren and the Folly of Genetic Ancestry Tests," *New York Times Online*, October 17, 2018.

Kim Tallbear, "Genomic Articulations of Indigeneity," *Social Studies of Science* Vol. 43, No. 4 (August 2013), 509–5.

Notes

- 1 Our thanks to all the students, staff of the Whitney Humanities Center, colleagues, and visitors who made this seminar so rich and taught us so much. Special thanks to Director Gary Tomlinson, who was enthusiastic about the topic and provided the resources for the course.

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PART V

Trans* intersectionalities

* We include an asterisk after trans to indicate its capacious, flexible, and alternative uses in this volume as a modifier for gender, sexual, geographic, and racial intersections that are difficult to fix in place.



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“BEFORE INTERSECTIONALITY”¹

Dorothy Kim

The long history of intersectionality as both theory and activist praxis is one that centers Black feminist and Black queer thought, traced through multiple genealogies in both the humanities and the social sciences.² These genealogies include the writings and organizational activities of the Combahee River Collective and its Black feminist queer of color critique in the 1970s;³ the publication of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s watershed legal studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s;⁴ and the more recent work on “Intersectionality Studies” from Crenshaw and fellow legal scholars Sumi Cho and Leslie McCall.⁵ I use the term “before intersectionality” as a marker of a different temporal worldbuilding. As intersectionality as a theory and a praxis gets further theorized and used in the center of political organizing, what can the premodern archive tell us about what is possible and what worlds can be built?

Working within and responding to these different genealogies in 2019, Patricia Hill Collins explains the scholarly and social significance of intersectionality as follows:

Gender, race, ethnicity, nation, sexuality, ability, and age are not just categories designed to make intersectionality more user-friendly for academic research. Rather, these terms also reference important resistant knowledge traditions among subordinated peoples who oppose the social inequalities and social injustices that they experience. Such projects aim to address the deep-seated concerns of people who are subordinated within domestic and global expressions of racism, sexism, capitalism, colonialism, and similar systems of political domination and economic exploitation. Whatever the form of oppression they experience—race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, ethnicity, and nation—subordinated groups have a vested interest in resisting it.⁶

Collins here describes multiple identity axes in which interlocking oppressions can be situated. But more specifically her articulation of intersectionality also explains how to read systematic oppressive power regimes, and how different groups “resist.”

Foundational to intersectional thought is the acknowledgment of what Collins calls “systems of political domination and economic exploitation.” Here Collins underscores a central feature of intersectionality: situatedness. Crenshaw rejects a “single-axis framework” of analysis and describes these interlocking systems of oppression as multi-axis frameworks, dependent on a given subject’s race, gender, class, etc., and argued for greater awareness of how harm compounds and the “complexities of compoundedness” within these frameworks.⁷ The Combahee River Collective (CRC) offers a similar model of situatedness and compounded harm, as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explains:

The CRC described oppressions as “interlocking” or happening “simultaneously,” thus creating *new* measures of oppression and inequality. In other words, Black women could not quantify their oppression only in terms of sexism or racism, or of homophobia experienced by Black lesbians. They were not ever a single category, but it was the merging or enmeshment of those identities that compounded how Black women experienced oppression.⁸

I quickly sketch these centering genealogies and references as a way to then consider more in depth the entangled theoretical streams of intersectionality as a theory and praxis—not to emphasize “origin stories” but rather to lay out a conversation.⁹ More specifically, to think about “intellectual genealogies” as a way to “sit with, sit beside” a long discussion of intersectionality.¹⁰ This long discussion has included multistrand conversations among Black feminists, queer of color critique, and the material turn in theory, particularly the work of biopolitics and what “racialized assemblages” can add to the conversation about intersectionality.¹¹

These conversations also include the activist, feminist, and queer of color work of Chicana and Latinx feminists, such as Chela Sandoval, Cherríe Moraga, Norma Alarcón, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Maria Lugones. Additionally, in *Ornamentalism*, Anne Anlin Cheng uses an intersectional framework to explore the biopolitics of the “yellow woman,” which is ultimately about commodified object and pattern.¹² A perfect example of Cheng’s theorization occurred in the aftermath of the February 2021 attack on a nail salon in Atlanta in which multiple Asian women were killed, spurring the social media campaign #StopAsianHate. The “lotus flower” emoji that appeared after one typed in the #StopAsianHate hashtag literally reinscribed the digital biopolitics of the “yellow woman”; imagining her always, regularly, and in the *longue durée* as an Orientalized/ornamentalized *object* (see Figure 27.1). That same objectification and ornamentalization was part of the white supremacist shooter’s logic in targeting his victims in Atlanta. All these different discussions about intersectionality—its theory, its praxis, its use in identifying power dynamics in relation to white settler colonial, imperial, cisgendered heteropatriarchy—should be discussed together in conversation, sitting with and sitting beside.

These different strands need to be part of a larger, interwoven discussion, and treated with critical generosity, especially in the study of the premodern, global Middle Ages. I see this critical generosity as a form of worldbuilding, stretching into spaces, times, and zones where the multiple conversations of intersectionality can create counternarratives to the white, cisgendered, heteropatriarchal “origin stories” of the Middle Ages that have become a stomping ground for white nostalgia and violent supremacist fantasies. These groups, writers, and pundits effectively weaponize nostalgia for a white toxic vision of the premodern European past to violently attack marginalized groups all in the name of an imagined white ethnostate. Premodern critical intersectionality serves as a corrective to these origin stories that want to promote the genius of “Western civilization.” This work matters in the Middle Ages because it can uncover other possibilities and tell different stories that break from these toxic, white supremacist visions that have enlivened and emboldened white terrorist actions all over the world.



Figure 27.1 #StopAsianHate and lotus flower.

What can the premodern archive reveal about how structures of power began to experiment with what we could now identify as multi-axis frameworks of oppression? The rest of this article will consider chronopolitics, race, and premodern temporalities to explore two case studies at different ends of medieval “Europe.” First, I will consider how gender, race, and sexuality create different ballasts to the structures of 11th-century Byzantine power. Second, I will examine how premodern critical intersectionality can help us rewrite an origin story of the English Empire and reinscribe Black feminist methodologies into a space that has thus far whitewashed race.

27.1 Before intersectionality: race matters in the Middle Ages

One of the enduring issues in discussing the premodern archive and race, as well as gender and sexuality, is the persistent assumption that the premodern world was somehow “pre-racial.” This move is rhetorically and ideologically linked with claims of a “post-racial” present.¹³ Ultimately, as Charles Mills argues, time is political in discussions of race.

Think of Christian time, for example—not hard to do, since we are still living it, in the year of our Lord (AD, CE) 2019, whether we are Christians or not, or indeed religious believers at all. Here we have a sharp beginning, the birth of Christ, a before-and-after periodization, and of course originally a powerful narrative of damnation and redemption and, with the Second Coming, the eventual end of the world. Even if one’s Christian identity is backgrounded in one’s life, it still constitutes a shaping temporal matrix for approaching the world, and for those to whom it is foregrounded—the medieval knight on the quest to reclaim Jerusalem, the nineteenth-century missionary seeking to save the souls of those in Darkest Africa—it is the central frame.¹⁴

Within this view, differences in religious belief constitute differences in the reckoning of time. Specifically, medieval Jews, Muslims, and Black “pagans”, who lived outside this normative Christian time “affirm[ed] alternative chronologies, alternative time maps,” and their “chronic

errors” operate as markers of difference.¹⁵ In this way, the history of structural racism and race is deeply embedded in a Eurocentric linear timeline that is, itself, wrapped around the history of Christianity.

As Mills further explains, discussing “racial time” means “mapping racial time,” and in order to do so,

we will need to know how far back such societies can be found. As with the metaphysics of race, this is a contested issue. The two main candidates have been a short periodization that traces race-thinking, race, and racism back to early modernity, and a long periodization that finds race-thinking, race, and racism as far back as classical antiquity. (For the latter view, Aristotle is the pioneering racist theorist of the Western tradition, insofar as his “natural slaves” are ethnically marked as Persian.) However, work in medieval studies has recently introduced a third candidate (a “medium” periodization?) that locates the emergence of race in the Middle Ages.¹⁶

Locating the origins of race or race-thinking in early modernity, what Mills calls “short periodization,” allows more left-leaning scholarship to “tie racism neatly to imperial capitalism.”¹⁷ However, this approach raises pressing methodological issues, leading Mills to advocate for a longer history model, following the lead of scholars such as Benjamin Isaac and Geraldine Heng in locating the development of race-thinking in the Middle Ages. This view of race allows different factors and historical strands to take the foreground, in particular the role of religion. Considering Heng’s evidence for medieval race-thinking and racialized power structures, Mills speculates that it could

mean that from its inception, the Western tradition has been structured around ethnic exclusion, which—depending on the outcome of the debate between long and medium periodization scholars—either becomes racial from antiquity, or at least from the Middle Ages onward. Christianity, though nominally universalistic, inherits this normative template and gives it a religious backing.¹⁸

As a marker of difference and chronopolitical identity, religion is an essential structural component of creating a long history of structural racism. Ultimately, if this view prevails, Christian historical time would be synonymous with “racial time” because it features power structures that “delegitimize the temporal origins, the timelines of descent, of those disqualified in advance from being true believers and genuine members of civil society.”¹⁹

I offer this outline of chronopolitics to highlight the difficulties of the *before* in “*before* intersectionality.” The following case study from the Byzantine world is just one example of not only religiously-focused power structures in racial time but also an intersectional model that considers race, gender, faith, and geography.

27.2 Premodern critical intersectionality in the Byzantine world

What does “before intersectionality” look like in the Eastern Mediterranean? Geraldine Heng explains that “race” in the European Middle Ages depended on location, temporalities, and conditions on the ground as well; it was not fixed but rather contextual.²⁰ In his 2020 book *Byzantine Intersectionality*, Roland Betancourt explains that gender, and particularly antifeminism, was the ballast of intersectional structural harm in the Byzantine world rather than race. In contrast, race, and especially Blackness, is not generally remarked upon in Byzantine sources;

it is Western travelers to Constantinople “who are both struck by the diversity of people in the city and also note that the Byzantines themselves did not always pass as white.”²¹

For example, Robert of Clari’s 13th-century account comments on the delight and respect of the Byzantine emperor and court over the visit of a Black Nubian king, who also appears to have spoken in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the region. Betancourt explains that there is no official documentation of this visit because it was an unremarkable event for the court. In contrast, Betancourt later brings up a 12th-century incident involving a group of drunken Venetians who stole the imperial barge and “performed a mock coronation of a Byzantine emperor.”²² In this context, it is the Venetians who are described as “barbarians,” displaying “a certain discomfort toward dark skin felt by Westerners, which the Byzantines clearly did not share.”²³

In the Byzantine world, for instance, Blackness can also be read as a sign of religious devotion or asceticism for early desert saints, and Betancourt remarks on the lack of surprise or commentary about transgender masculine saints whose religious transformations include the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. Using the example of Athanasius, whose body is “just as an Ethiopian,” Betancourt observes,

Athanasius’s being read as an Ethiopian causes no tension in the narrative; he certainly is not treated as some demonic apparition or as an object unworthy of regard. There is a sense, however, that the former wife has transitioned not only in gender identity but also in racial identity. In the story of Theodore of Alexandria, we learn that the trans monk has been “hardened from the burning of the sun” ... a phrase indicating the transformative darkening of his complexion through his ascetic deeds.²⁴

Here, racial and gender identities are intertwined and considered not simply quotidian, but exemplary for deep, religious devotion. Black transgender masculine identity is considered an example of what to strive for and aspire to.

However, Betancourt also provides a counterexample, illustrating how the compounded harm of intersectional Byzantine lives pivots on the question of antifeminism and misogyny. He returns to the figure of Manuel I Komnenos, who is described by a Byzantine account as dark-skinned and manly; his dark skin telegraphs as a “manly mixture” or “manly coloring,” as opposed to “womanly” or the appearance of “womanly and soft people.” Betancourt explains how these terms used to contrast Komnenos’s “manly” darkness are actually terms used to describe “effeminacy” and also “same-gender sex acts.”²⁵ This “transphobic and homophobic” rhetoric is use[d]

to distance Manuel from “womanly and soft people” (*tous gynaikias kai malthakou*): “womanly” (*gynaikias*) communicated not only effeminacy but also weakness and cowardice, while “soft” (*malthakous*) carried similar connotations and served as a derogatory descriptor for those practicing same-gender sexual acts. *Malthakos* even became a technical term in late antique medicine to pathologize same-gender desire, particularly for men acting as the passive partner in such acts.²⁶

As Betancourt shows, understanding Komnenos and his representation requires an intersectional framework that takes into account the interplay between race, gender, and sexuality, specifically how race and gender interact to create a Byzantine oppressive politics that considered several identity markers simultaneously. This multi-axis framework was informed by ancient Greek discussions of racial theory, such as Hippocrates’s *Airs, Waters, Places*, which organized the world racially through climate and geography:

Historians often refer to the ancient theory of race as the “environmental theory”; it divided the known world into climate zones and regarded racial difference as a by-product of the exposure of both skin and humors to the sun. In this theory gender plays a crucial role in how racial difference is conceived and understood ... According to this theory, environmental conditions affected more than the outward appearance of a person’s skin; it also influenced their nature and character, including their gender identity and sexual character. Hippocrates, for example, states that the harsh environment of the Scythians makes them feeble and effeminate, noting that the men are even said to “become eunuchs, do women’s work, live like women and converse accordingly.” Thus, beginning in these early texts, we find a theorization of an intersection of race and gender.²⁷

He concludes this section by pointing out that the standard depiction of Byzantine eunuchs as “light-skinned youth with long hair strongly suggests that, in a sense, their gender identity was privileged over their racial identity.”²⁸ Their racialized skin color, their whiteness, was entangled with where they fit on the feminine spectrum. How they were treated, and the compounded harm they experienced from intersectional violence, were then dependent on where the person fit on the antifeminism scale. Racialization would shift depending on that antifeminist spectrum.

27.3 England, racial capitalism, and before intersectionality²⁹

The work of Betancourt on Byzantine intersectionality supports the *longue durée* approach to race. Meanwhile, as was noted in the discussion above, Mills argues that the basis for the competing short history model hinges on histories of capitalism and particularly racial capitalism.³⁰ But what if the premodern archive can also offer earlier genealogies of racial capitalism? What does that mean for intersectionality?

This last example and case study comes from my own recent work about pre-1500 England, where I wonder not just what “before intersectionality” may look like, but what before “racial capitalism” looks like. Ultimately, I consider how Black feminist methodologies related to the archive of slavery must be centered in this work.

It has long been assumed that England prior to 1500 was a white space, with a white population. However, recent bioarchaeological data recovered from 14th-century London grave sites, in a collaboration between the Centre for Human Bioarchaeology, the Museum of London, and the Michigan State Department of Anthropology, makes clear that centuries of white supremacist medieval studies scholarship have whitewashed the past.³¹ Primary authors Rebecca Redfern and Joseph T. Hefner confess that though they told anecdotes to each other about finding people of “black ancestry and dual heritage” in medieval cemetery populations for over 15 years, they had never formally recorded them, and thus, “we have significantly contributed to their ‘official absence’ and further served to marginalize them from mainstream knowledge and academic discourse.”³² The events of the Leeds International Medieval Conference in 2017 and the attending far-right obsession with the medieval past made these researchers realize that “it is more important than ever to ensure that everyone is ‘present and correct.’”³³

Their study examines samples of the remains of 41 individuals buried at East Smithfield, a Black Death cemetery in present-day London. They took this data and compared it against “published light stable isotope work on childhood residency” as well as available mitochondrial DNA data to establish birth geographies for all 41 subjects. Additionally, they examined the

samples for “osteological evidence for disease and indicators of stress,” that is the various stressors and traumas the subjects may have faced in their lives.³⁴ For example, they use Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectional theory to help build two new “osteobiographies.” As they explain:

This theory recognizes that different forms of oppression, inequality, and injustice (among others, racism, sexism, disability, and socioeconomic statuses) interact and interrelate, and importantly raises the suggestion that there is no one experience of identity (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Nash, 2008). That is to say, the experience of a person with Black ancestry in Medieval London would have varied according to their gender and age, if they had been born in the city or not, if they were free or a servant/enslaved, whether they were rich or poor, and if they had a physical impairment or not. There is no one way of being, as Lorde (2007, p. 138) wrote, “[t]here is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”³⁵

They compared their bioarchaeological findings to documentary evidence, including the materials from the *England’s Immigrants 1330–1550* project database.³⁶ They incorporated written sources like Richard of Devizes’s chronicle, where he complained in 1192 about “undesirable ... moors” in London.³⁷ They also discuss the 13th-century case of the Sicilian knight Roger de Lyntin’s runaway enslaved Ethiopian, who is referred to in legal documents as his “Saracen slave.”³⁸

Using this intersectional method, Redfern and Hefner observe that “in our sample of 41 individuals, 29% were people with non-white European ancestry,” a significant percentage supported by other 14th-century primary source evidence.³⁹ Also of significance is the fact that the majority of the non-white European ancestry group was composed of enslaved or formerly enslaved individuals. In this way, Black people in late-medieval London are not just abstractions or theoretical fantasies; they are connected to real bodies, and real enslaved and racialized people on the ground. Even with the subsequent refinement of their data and discussions, we are looking at a potential 14th-century Black London population of between 13 and 21 percent.⁴⁰ This estimate would be roughly equivalent to the current Black population of London or the Black populations of Detroit, Philadelphia, New York, or Washington, DC.

In addition, population affiliation in medieval European historical discussions has hewed to the white supremacist, white racial imaginary of a premodern white Europe. Often, medieval studies historians have used the canard that “there is no empirical evidence of Black and POC in the Middle Ages” as a way to say we can’t discuss “race” (and thus structural racism).⁴¹ Methodologically, there has never been a systematic analysis of population affiliation in medieval European grave sites for any kind of population breakdown. This means there has just been a default assumption that medieval Europe has been white when there has never been an analysis to actually check if the bioarchaeological data of population affiliation reveals only a white population.

England had already begun practicing how to organize, categorize, and hierarchize non-hegemonic white Christian groups because, as Heng explains, it represents one of the earliest racial states.⁴² The English state, as part of a larger colonial project in the 12th and 13th centuries, also racialized the Welsh, Irish, and Muslims in its Eastern Mediterranean crusader colony (Acre, lost in 1291) using many of the same Orientalist tropes flung at both real and imagined Islamic foes.⁴³ Structural racism had different terrains and archives for different groups. In the case of the racio-religious difference between English Jews and Muslims, we can identify their populations by how they were buried in grave sites, and for the pre-1290 Jewish community in England, a small Anglo-Hebrew documentary archive.⁴⁴ For the Welsh and Irish who the English colonized

in the 12th and 13th centuries, we have substantial documentary archives of how the subaltern racialized populations spoke back to the English colonial hegemony.

Unlike English racialization connected to Jews, Muslims, Welsh, and Irish, Black men and women usually did not have “emic” documentation or points of view where we hear directly about their lives or racial formations. Or another likely scenario is that the documentation has been completely whitewashed because of the de facto white imaginary that medieval England was a “white” population space. Concomitantly, English archives, unlike many European archives, have a mass destruction event pinned to Henry VIII’s monastic dissolution (1536–40) (a comparative example between England and Germany is discussed in relation to religious women’s archives by Kim 2022).⁴⁵ Furthermore, scholarship has deliberately white-washed the presence of Black people in the medieval archive.

What this scholarly, and thus popular, white population imaginary means is that the myth of a premodern whites-only Europe has affected how we examine the premodern past. This is both about how we think through scholarly methodology and also how that affects how we can even examine the archive. Because of this interdisciplinary collaboration of a medieval literature scholar, a bioarchaeologist, and two bioanthropologists, we have recently, in breaking disciplinary silos and examining a pluralistic view of our evidence, come to a field-changing revelation. Because of questions asked by Dorothy Kim to Sharon DeWitte, Joseph T. Hefner, and Rebecca Redfern about methodology and how scholars identify race in medieval grave sites and what other medieval English grave sites look like in relation to population, we (my collaborators and I in conversation) have realized that in fact, the medieval English record of population, as well as the larger medieval European record (c. 500–1500 CE), does not actually systematically use race as a category in analyzing medieval remains. What this means is that the white imaginary assumption of a de facto completely white population is used as the “empirical” evidence for a white-only population discussion of all medieval European, and especially medieval English gravesites (the exception being Redfern and Hefner 2019, 2021). Thus, there is no “empirical” evidence for a white population in medieval England and Europe because there is no analysis done on the archive of remains by race (White, Black, Jewish, Muslim, etc.). But beyond a handful of grave sites from medieval England that three of my co-authors (DeWitte, Hefner, and Redfern) have previously written about or in our collaborative article, this means the rest of the gravesites in medieval England have not been systematically analyzed for race. There is an immense amount of work to be done to accurately analyze the population record and debunk the white supremacist scholarly and methodological structures that have upheld and kept the white racial imaginary in place for centuries and are such an enervating part of white medieval heritage politics in contemporary far-right politics.⁴⁶

What I am arguing is that 14th-century Black London represents what Katherine McKittrick calls “demonic grounds,” as well as an earlier genealogy of racial capitalism linked to the formation of the Black Atlantic and the English transatlantic slave trade.⁴⁷ This earlier genealogy requires that we reassess what Mills describes as both the short and medium histories of race in his discussion of the chronopolitics of race. In this case, racial capitalism has an earlier rehearsal several centuries before it is discussed as firmly entrenched in the English scene.⁴⁸ In addition, how do we address this complete terrain shift methodologically? The only way forward, I believe, is through Black feminist methodologies of the archive of slavery, particularly the work of Saidiya Hartman, Marisa Fuentes, Jennifer Morgan, Jessica Marie Johnson, and Katherine McKittrick.⁴⁹

This is the possibility I see in “before intersectionality”: the potential uses of Saidiya Hartman’s “critical fabulations” as a way to finally tell the lives of this archive that has been, until

now, whitewashed, erased, and silenced.⁵⁰ This is the chronological worldbuilding that I think is possible when one can “sit with, sit beside” and gather the worlds of biopolitical racialized assemblages, Black feminist methodologies, long genealogies of queer of color critique, and intersectional theory and praxis to make sense of lives, structured compounded harms, and the intersectional lives of the premodern past.

Notes

- 1 Sections of this chapter were developed from an early draft of the introduction to *A Cultural History of Race*, 6 vols., vol. 3: *The Renaissance and Early Modern Age (1350–1550)*, edited by Kimberley A. Coles and Dorothy Kim (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 1–18.
- 2 I discuss the enmeshed genealogies of intersectionality at length in Dorothy Kim and Michelle Sauer, “Race and Gender,” in *A Cultural History of Race*, edited by Coles and Kim, vol. 3, 125–42.
- 3 *The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977)*, available online at www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/.
- 4 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139–67. See also Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.
- 5 Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 785–810.
- 6 Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 10.
- 7 Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing,” 140, 166.
- 8 Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, introduction to *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, ed. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2017), 4.
- 9 See Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 39–40.
- 10 Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 39 and 58.
- 11 See Jasbir K. Puar, *Territorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 12 See Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- 13 For a discussion of post-racialism and its history in the American context, see Roopali Mukherjee, “Antiracism Limited: A Pre-History of Post-Race,” *Cultural Studies* 30, no. 1 (2016): 47–77. See also Sumi Cho, “Post-Racialism,” *Iowa Law Review* 94, 5 (2009): 1589–1649. I discuss the idea of the medieval preracial in “The Politics of the Medieval Preracial,” *Literature Compass* 18, 10 (2021), e12617. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12617>
- 14 Charles W. Mills, “The Chronopolitics of Racial Time,” *Time & Society* 29, no. 2 (2021): 297–317, at 300–1.
- 15 Mills, “Chronopolitics,” 301.
- 16 Mills, “Chronopolitics,” 304.
- 17 Mills, “Chronopolitics,” 304.
- 18 Mills, “Chronopolitics,” 305–6.
- 19 Mills, “Chronopolitics,” 306.
- 20 See Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), esp. 4: “The chapters of this volume thus point to particular *moments* and *instances* of how race is made, to indicate the exemplary, dynamic, and resourceful character of race-making under conditions of possibility, not to extract repetitions without difference. They point to racializing momentum that manifests unevenly, and nonidentically, in different places and at different times—to sketch the dynamic field of forces within which miscellaneous instances of race-making can occur under varied local conditions” (her emphasis).
- 21 Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 173.
- 22 Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 173–175.
- 23 Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 175.
- 24 Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 192.
- 25 Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 192–3.
- 26 Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 193.
- 27 Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 194.
- 28 Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 194.

- 29 A version of this section that discusses “‘Officially absent but actually present’: bioarchaeological evidence for population diversity in London during the Black Death, AD 1348–50” has been previously published in Kimberley Anne Coles and Dorothy Kim, “Introduction,” in *A Cultural History of Race in the Renaissance and Early Modern Age*, vol. 3, eds. Kimberley Ann Coles and Dorothy Kim (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 11–12. In addition, a small portion of my discussion of reexamining the effects of this Black premodern population assessment is from Dorothy Kim, Sharon DeWitte, Joseph T. Hefner, and Rebecca Redfern, “Race, population affinity, and mortality risk during the Second Plague Pandemic in 14th-century London, England,” under submission in *Bioarchaeology International*.
- 30 Cedric Robinson draws a direct connection between the rise of European capitalism and racial consciousness. See Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 3rd edn. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), esp. 9–28. Though Robinson couches his discussion of medieval economy in the fraught terms of “feudalism,” he argues through illustrative examples (contingent on time and place) that the growth of the European bourgeoisie logically developed alongside a growing need for human capital from the rhetorical “outside.” He notes: “The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into “racial” ones. As the Slavs became the natural slaves, the racially inferior stock for domination and exploitation during the early Middle Ages, as the Tartars came to occupy a similar position in the Italian cities of the late Middle Ages, so at the systemic interlocking of capitalism in the sixteenth century, the peoples of the Third World began to fill this expanding category of a civilization reproduced by capitalism” (26).
- 31 Rebecca Redfern and Joseph T. Hefner, “‘Officially absent but actually present’: bioarchaeological evidence for population diversity in London during the Black Death, AD 1348–50,” in *Bioarchaeology of Marginalized People*, ed. Madeleine L. Mant and Alyson Jaagumägi Holland (London: Elsevier, 2019), 69–114.
- 32 Redfern and Hefner, “Bioarchaeological evidence for population diversity,” 70.
- 33 Redfern and Hefner, “Bioarchaeological evidence for population diversity,” 70.
- 34 Redfern and Hefner, “Bioarchaeological evidence for population diversity,” 71.
- 35 Redfern and Hefner, “Bioarchaeological evidence for population diversity,” 71–2. They cite Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies”; Jennifer C. Nash, “Re-Thinking Intersectionality,” *Feminist Review* 89, no. 1 (2008): 1–15; and Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984; reprint 2007).
- 36 See *England’s Immigrants 1330–1550: Resident Aliens in the Late Middle Ages*, www.englishimmigrants.com/ (accessed January 12, 2022).
- 37 Redfern and Hefner, “Bioarchaeological evidence for population diversity,” 77. See also Richard of Devizes, *Chronicon de rebus gestis Ricardi Primi* (London: 1838), retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/chroniconricardi01rich>.
- 38 Redfern and Hefner, “Bioarchaeological evidence for population diversity,” 77. For a full discussion, see Michael Ray, “A Black Slave on the run in Thirteenth-Century England,” *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 51 (2007): 111–19.
- 39 Redfern and Hefner, “Bioarchaeological evidence for population diversity,” 106.
- 40 Dorothy Kim, Sharon DeWitte, Joseph T. Hefner, and Rebecca Redfern, “Race, population affinity, and mortality risk during the Second Plague Pandemic in 14th-century London, England” under submission in *Bioarchaeology International*.
- 41 This is literally what has been repeated and told to me at conferences and talks I have given about medieval race in England. This is also what has been told to my students when they have told professors in history what I have said about a multiracial population in medieval England.
- 42 Heng, *Invention*, esp. chapter 2. See also Heng, *England and the Jews: How Religion and Violence Created the First Racial State in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- 43 Heng, *Invention*, 110–80. Coral Lumley, “The ‘dark Welsh’: Color, race, and alterity in the matter of medieval Wales,” *Literature Compass* 18:9–10 (2019) e12538. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12538>. Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh, “The depoliticized Saracen and Muslim erasure,” *Literature Compass* 16:9–10 (2019) e12548. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12548>
- 44 Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, *Hebrew and Hebrew-Latin documents from medieval England: a diplomatic and palaeographical study* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2015).
- 45 Dorothy Kim, “The Historiographies of Premodern Critical Race Studies and Jewish Studies,” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (2022): 139–48. doi:10.1017/pli.2021.40.

- 46 Danielle Christmas, “Book chapter – From Heritage Politics to Hate: Neo-Confederate Novels & White Protectionism,” August 10, 2018, <https://daniellechristmas.com/2018/08/10/book-chapter-from-heritage-politics-to-hate-neo-confederate-novels-white-protectionism/>. The term “heritage politics” comes from Danielle Christmas’s work and talks.
- 47 We (Kim, DeWitte, Hefner, and Redfern) elaborate on this as a “demonic grounds” in the submitted article for *Bioarchaeology International*.
- 48 See Jennifer Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
- 49 Saidiya V. Hartman’s works include *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008); and “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 26, no. 3 (2008): 1–14. See also Melissa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Jessica Marie Johnson, *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*.
- 50 For a discussion of “critical fabulation,” its methods, and its scholarly value, see Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” esp. 11–12.

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TRANS OF COLOR LIBERATION

An unauthorized history of the future

Jules Gill-Peterson

imagine a better you in heaven. already.

imagine being an angel

could also mean being trapped, like prisoners to the gods.

—javy dodd, *The Black Condition, Ft. Narcissus*

What do we have that we want to keep?

—Tourmaline, “How to Freedom Dream”¹

After North Carolina passed HB2 in 2016, the “bathroom bill” that initiated an ongoing and expanding anti-trans legislative assault in the United States, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* published Volume 22, Issue 3 with cover art by Micah Bazant depicting Micky Bradford, a Black trans femme organizer. The back of the issue explains that cover “represents Bradford’s brave and stunning vogue performance on the night of the passage of HB2 in Raleigh.” In the illustration, Bradford poses defiantly before raised Black fists, surrounded by washed out white police figures, over which is written “Southern Trans Resistance is Beautiful.”²

The choice of this cover image for *GLQ*, published by Duke University Press out of North Carolina, reads as an avowed political response to HB2: an endorsement of “Southern Trans Resistance” through an iconic moment of Black trans femme publicity confronting the state. Curiously, however, the cover is also dissociated from the issue, which contains no articles or features about Bradford, or HB2. Bradford’s iconicity and her Black publicity are rendered superficial in the sense that they are reductively literal, stamped on the cover of the issue rather than an aesthetic prompt for the content of its pages.³ The Black trans femme is the symbol of a politics fit for the flagship journal of queer studies without elaboration, apparently not requiring analysis or her own voice beyond one slogan. What the specificities of Black trans femininity, Southern resistance, or Bradford’s political program have to say about HB2 beyond opposition are left to be guessed at.

This allegorical role for the Black trans woman, where she signifies something political and intellectual that she herself is not, is hardly the invention of *GLQ*.⁴ The ubiquity of such figural gestures would be macabre to count, though not difficult. The Black trans woman is nearly always in the foreground of left queer and trans thought or cultural production today, yet paradoxically she is also their background. She is hypervisible in the founding texts of queer of color

critique, on one end, certifying a radical political imaginary; and she is commodified by the most laughably conservative, assimilationist LGBT Pride platforms every June in corporate hagiographies of Marsha P. Johnson, on the other.⁵ The Black trans woman has been the signal figure of the so-called “trans tipping point,” with actress Laverne Cox’s image serving as an entire culture’s barometer of progress—or its ideological ruse, depending on whom you ask.⁶ She is increasingly everywhere, this Black trans woman, and yet her omnipresence seems to be exactly that which forbids her humanity, or forbids her life. “Don’t exist” is the injunction leveled at the Black trans woman, writes Eva Hayward.⁷ This is the situation of the “trap door” described by Tourmaline, Eric Stanley, and Johanna Burton: racialized trans femininity is overexposed to the inverse extent that its material footholds in the world are effectively shrunk.⁸ The two phenomena are indissociable.

While it may be unsurprising that scholars reproduce the broader dynamics of the social world in which they live, that hardly softens the blow considering the claims made by queer and trans studies in the name of Black trans women and trans women of color. How is it that queer and trans studies have sustained the necropolitical fiction that the Black trans woman and trans woman of color are central to their political *and* intellectual missions despite little proof?⁹ Put differently, why does the trans woman of color appear as the *preface* to such intersectional scholarship, rather than its actual content, or author? My contention is that the trans woman of color—so often a synecdochal phrase for a specifically *Black* trans woman—can be read as queer and trans studies’ intersectionality, or more precisely as its stand-in. The reasons why, and the many problems this figural substitution generates, concern a grammar forged in the 1970s and the resulting historical imaginary of a representational sphere dominated by American post-Stonewall narratives of emancipation. This chapter critically reads the idealization of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson and asks how the project of making them signify queer and trans intersectionality might be dismantled in favor of taking seriously trans women of color as authors and practitioners of political, historical, and aesthetic projects in which they are more than iconic cover images.

28.1 Idealizing the Sylvia and Marsha archive

In 1974, Sylvia Rivera was the cover girl of an issue of the New York City-based *From the Queens Liberation Front*. Writing as its editor, Lee Brewster charged that “in this era of phoniness, when the civil rights movement is dominated by writers, psychiatrists, politicians, and pseudo intellectuals, and those possible paid revolutionaries, it is time the sincerity and dedication of Sylvia be recognized.”¹⁰ *It is time*, already in 1974, yet these words could conceivably have been published yesterday. Barely a year after Rivera had physically fought her way on stage at a Christopher Street Day rally to deliver an incendiary indictment of the gay liberation movement—her iconic “Y’all Better Quiet Down” speech, the footage of which was digitized and recirculated online in the 2010s by Tourmaline—the organs of queer and trans liberation were already consolidating a grammar in which Rivera was meant to prompt a future shift in perception *before* actual liberation could begin.¹¹ Although Rivera and Johnson’s most prominent mutual aid and activist organization, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) had only just begun to run out of steam, their ongoing political work was nevertheless being converted into something allegorical and symbolic, like a cause that had to be rediscovered and recentred. This conversion from actual to conditional and futural was importantly accomplished through a radical rhetorical alibi. The “recognition” Brewster was calling for—no doubt with great sincerity—covered over the effect of the statement’s grammar, which dematerialized and domesticated Rivera into someone awaiting rediscovery mere years into her organizing and political activity.

Rather than a new way of narrating trans women of color after the “tipping point,” this process already underway in the mid-1970s forms the kernel of the historical imaginary attached to Rivera, Johnson, and their political movement for decades. While the whitewashing of Stonewall as a legibly gay and lesbian rebellion in the politically fractious years following the riot initially scrubbed Rivera and Johnson from the dominant narrative, their names began to resurface in the mainstream in the mid-1990s, particularly after the publication of historian Martin Duberman’s meticulously researched *Stonewall* (1993).¹² The decade also witnessed the rapid uptake of the word *transgender* as a non-medical, politically emancipatory umbrella term that was, paradoxically, platformed largely by social service and NGO organizations working with poor trans femmes of color and sex workers in gentrifying cities like New York.¹³ The word came to signify in the name of this population framed through deprecation as “at risk,” while simultaneously *not* representing them, as few of these women actually used transgender in the first person at the time.¹⁴ They were, on the contrary, subject to a new form of classification heralded as a politics that would save them by representing them through a gender category they did not use. As a result, Jessi Gan explains, the mythology “that all transgender people were *most* oppressed and *most* resistant at Stonewall (and still are today)” was secured in the 1990s through “recovery projects lubricated by Rivera’s memory” that “served to unify transgender politics along a gendered axis” that had never actually existed in its referential populations.¹⁵ In order to rectify the failure of the historical remembrance of Stonewall, which had erased trans women of color’s central role in fighting the police, Rivera (and Johnson, later) was made into a figurehead of transgender politics, a consolidation which ironically erased the very political conflicts over race, class, and respectability that had effectively ousted her from gay liberation over the course of the 1970s. Now disavowed, those conflicts could be preserved inside the category transgender in its claim to being an intersectional umbrella that named poor trans women of color as much as any other gender non-conforming people. If this moment of ostensible recalibration and coming to intersectional consciousness in the 1990s is also a repetition of the paradoxical structure produced by Brewster’s 1974 pronouncement, the point is that this structure has proven rather durable. The ascendant transgender politics of the 1990s were motivated to establish a new instrumentalization of the trans woman of color, albeit one that was incorporative instead of exclusionary.

Johnson was also murdered in 1992, though her death was never investigated. No longer able to speak back directly to those who used her likeness or name for their political platforms, she was more easily conscripted to a generalized transgender politics scrubbed of Black radicalism, anti-police and anti-prison organizing, a focus on sex workers and homelessness, and anti-capitalist revolutionary ideals. Like many neoliberal incorporations of ostensibly leftist figures and ideas, Johnson’s many material concerns were reduced to a cultural or representational form, often as inspiration. In “Lessons from a Starfish,” Eva Hayward offers an important clue to the psychic processes by which this revisionism was justified in the growing transgender cultural production of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Reading the musical group Antony and the Johnsons, headed by the white vocalist Anohni, Hayward points out that *Johnsons* is taken from Marsha’s name. “In Antony [now Anohni]’s own words,” writes Hayward,

a transgender legacy is written into the musical group; “she.” An “outsider,” who threw “the first bottle” [at Stonewall; an apocryphal story], who was murdered in 1992, structures the creative and political intent of the band. Johnson is Antony’s “hero,” perhaps, and I say this only speculatively, an ego ideal.¹⁶

Hayward’s careful speculation has since been loudly corroborated in the prolific libidinal attachment of queer and trans studies to demonstrating its intersectionality by invoking Rivera and

Johnson, over and over, as self-evident ideals in a political program the two of them never pursued: one in which “transgender” (today, usually just “trans”) cleanly orders axes of race, class, gender, and sexuality under a radical umbrella in a way neither woman ever experienced during their lives. In the 2020 Kessler Lecture delivered at the CUNY Graduate Center, Roderick Ferguson began his remarks by invoking Rivera and Johnson as the proper intersectional ground for resisting fascism writ-large in the 21st century, a kind of lumpen proletariat that would guide the collective “us” of the lecture’s audience in ongoing struggle alongside the thinkers of the Frankfurt School.¹⁷ At one poignant moment, Ferguson displayed a still from Rivera’s 1973 speech, explaining that “Rivera’s outcry at the Christopher Street Liberation Day implores us to consider how fascism recruits us into its regimes of acceptance.” The visual still of Rivera’s speech fills in a rather larger set of gaps that are not elaborated upon in the lecture, which moves on to other matters. Rivera’s highly specific concerns that day in 1973—police violence, jail violence, and their reliance on intra-mural violence from an ascendant trans-exclusionary gay and lesbian liberation movement—are meant to laminate cleanly onto the fascism of the 21st century, presumably by framing Rivera as the vanguard of an intersectional anti-fascist political program for *everyone* in the working classes, then and now. By what means a critique of gay liberation in the 1970s transposes to today’s neoliberal political landscape is what interests me in this move.

As an historian, I am trained to doubt that an ephemeral archival still can ever certify such an expansive interpretation except through heavy idealization. Yet Rivera’s 1973 speech is hardly what I would characterize as material for idealization. As an angry indictment she had to physically fight her way on stage to deliver, it is a manifestation of *negativity*, of rage. Yet Ferguson concludes the Kessler lecture by saying:

In their full appreciation, these histories [of STAR] encourage us to meet each other’s needs and to demand social change. There, in the lumpen household, filled with queens who floated from room to room, and with puppies that played and snuggled, we might find our model and inspiration.¹⁸

Model and inspiration. Nothing more than a few interview scraps and a picture of the STAR House building in New York City are cited as evidence that we should find in the intimate lives of these highly idealized trans women of color—“floating from room to room,” dreamily, as if it were not a dirt poor tenement where sex workers were pursuing mutual aid to reduce harm—an intersectional program for proper anti-fascist action in the twenty-first century. How can the archive signify so much that is literally not there in the record, except through the idealizing desire—and correspondingly speculative reading practice—of a politics derived from the conditions of 2020, not 1973? If the “we” invoked in the lecture desires a political theory of intersectional trans lumpen proletarianism and vanguardism adequate to the contemporary resurgence of authoritarian and fascist movements, why don’t “we” author that theory collectively, rather than pretend to retrieve it out of STAR?

There is perhaps a political and methodological fetish of the visible, or proximity in play, a presumption the presence of a trans woman of color leaps into meaning or politics. The trans woman of color is so often, like the unnamed Black femme from *Tongues Untied* that opens Ferguson’s landmark book *Aberrations in Black* (2004) but then disappears from its chapters, a performative subject whose presence is only aesthetic or evocative, rather than framing a person and actor who herself produces knowledge. Now generalized, this tendency has generated its most mundane form in more recent work in queer of color studies, like Joshua Chambers-Letson’s *After the Party* (2018), which refers throughout to its subject as “queer and trans” when

in fact there are no trans artists or cultural producers studied at length in the book.¹⁹ Who is this empty trans of color signifier lumped into the ostensibly intersectional queer lifeworld and made its shining symbol in absentia? One explanation, as Black trans scholars have argued persuasively, is the real lack of Black trans women and trans women of color in the academy, producing an obsessive fantasy as compensation for this material absence in empty gestures made by non-Black, non-trans feminine scholars.²⁰ Yet the very fixation on a performative trans of color woman, or a merely aesthetic cover image, is also reflected methodologically. Queer of color studies, to stay with this example, has largely eschewed the most obvious methodology that could challenge the absence of trans women of color as agents of thought in the field: ethnography.²¹ Despite numerous self-reflexive studies by anthropologists working with trans women of color and people from around the world who are grouped under (and often resist) racialized categorization as trans feminine, an American-centric, cultural studies version of queer of color studies continues to avoid the implications of letting trans women of color speak outside of their idealization and analytic capture for theory.²²

The problem in its widest aperture is a style of critical thought dependent upon the allegory and abstraction of the trans woman of color into an image and surface for reflecting contemporary political desires, standing in as intersectional models and programs for transformative change that are not reflective of those who are invoked. The figural life of the trans woman of color, no more so than in the case of Rivera and Johnson, abets entire systems of thought and analytics that are disconnected from the political organizing and material lives they claim to platform. More precisely, we might say that a certain systemic style of thinking takes the trans woman of color as its background. The trans woman of color is ultimately *symptomatic* at the same time as she is imagined to be so oppressed that she passes for the real, demanding we doggedly pursue what she knows without asking her to speak it. In the outcome, she becomes the avatar of a critique that she never authorized. Following Jennifer Nash's exceptionally thoughtful writing on intersectionality and Black feminism, I would suggest that queer and trans studies idealize the trans woman of color by way of confusing intersectionality as an analytic of complex systems of power (trans woman of color as symptom, or symbol of a system of oppression) with intersectionality as a practice of actual social movements (trans woman of color as model, or vanguard of that system's imminent destruction and replacement).²³

28.2 Trans of color liberation as coalition

If queer and trans studies have idealized the trans woman of color to lead in her name from the bottom, my contention is that the maneuver has been premised on a revisionist history and sly grammar that continue to evacuate trans women of color of meaning as political actors precisely when claiming to do the opposite. To be clear, this is not a paranoid contention meant to personally question the many dedicated, thoughtful, and impactful scholars committed to intersectional and transformative political work that I have cited. I have offered examples in this chapter not to single out anyone, but rather to point to a common inheritance in queer and trans studies of an idealizing tendency born of early 1970s battles of social movements like gay liberation. I don't mean to suggest that scholarly interest or concern for trans women of color is somehow categorically wrong, foolhardy, or even naïve. Nor is the interest in activist histories and their import for organizing and thinking today a superficial endeavor. Rather, my critique amounts to a call for what Kadji Amin has helpfully termed "deidealizing" the trans woman of color so that the premise of her entry into thought and politics is not the suppression of her historicity, voice, expertise, *and* inevitable failure to live up to the field's contemporary political desires.²⁴

The rewards of deidealization are many and they are proximate to the scholarly projects I have critically read, rather than superseding them.

In June of 2021, the second Brooklyn Liberation march brought thousands into the streets wearing white. Organized by a collective of queer and trans people of color “that organizes in the name of Black trans liberation,” the march took up recognizable ground, but testified to an alternative political logic to idealization with roots in Black feminism: intersectionality as coalition. The march’s Statement of Intent is a nimble document that constellates the prevailing emergencies of the moment without ranking them.²⁵ While the protest responded to an acute avalanche of over 100 pieces of anti-trans legislation tabled in US state legislatures, most of which targeted children, it also continued the 2020 march’s emphasis on the vast scale of anti-Black violence structuring hypervisibility in the form of the police, mass incarceration, and capitalist exploitation. In my own public opposition to legislation targeting children through the banning or criminalization of gender affirming care, as well as banning trans girls from playing organized sport, I stressed that one of the serious challenges of organizing against this right-wing campaign was that very few trans children beyond the wealthiest and whitest would be directly harmed by these bills. The kinds of gender clinics being outlawed in states like Arkansas serve a disproportionately upper middle class, white and suburban population, whereas most trans youth, who are poor, non-white, and cannot count on family support in the first place, do not have the relative luxury of losing access to healthcare or other incorporative, assimilationist institutions. While that context does not minimize the danger of such legislation, both in its specific policy reach and the larger eugenic and eradictory political climate it abets, I did mean to dramatize how the narrow political opposition that formed in state capitals to these bills further erased the urgent needs of the demographic majority of trans youth, who are more likely to already be subject to policing and exhaustion through the school to prison pipeline, or lack of access to the formal economy.²⁶

In lifting up the imperiled trans child as an implicitly white, universal figure protected by a loving, supportive family, school, and healthcare team under threat from state legislators, the mainstream response to these bills tied itself to a sentimental politics of the innocent child.²⁷ That choice was a critical error both in the sense that it grossly ignored the moral panic *in the name of saving children* that drove the legislative push in its resonance with broader extremist politics, as well as the fact that the politics of childhood innocence, directly built of anti-Blackness and the political idealization of whiteness as precious vulnerability, would throw most actual trans children under the bus.²⁸ In short, by inheriting a generalized trans politics that could latch onto a generalized politics of childhood innocence, the liberal play was effectively to sacrifice one set of trans youth’s interest to save the privileged minority. Brooklyn Liberation’s approach did not employ such arithmetic. While telling trans youth in no uncertain terms “WE GOT YOUR BACK!”, the Statement of Intent did not sacrifice the political demands of Black trans people of all ages to do so, adding:

WE REMEMBER LAST SUMMER.THERE’S BEEN NO **#JUSTICEFORLAYLEEN**. BLACK TRANS PEOPLE ARE STILL BEING MURDERED. **#BLACKTRANSLIVESMATTER**. LAWMAKERS ARE LEGISLATING VOTER SUPPRESSION AND GENOCIDE. FREE PALESTINE. **WE BARELY SURVIVED AN INSURRECTION**. MANY OF US DIDN’T SURVIVE THE TRUMP ERA. MANY OF US WON’T SURVIVE THE BIDEN ERA. THE STATUS QUO NEVER WORKED FOR US.²⁹

The political grammar of Brooklyn Liberation, rather than idealizing one figure and elevating her to lead an ostensibly intersectional movement of conflicting interests, actively *joined* varied

political interests in a coalition built out of a named common pattern of experience: “THE STATUS QUO NEVER WORKED FOR US.” Rather than producing an idealized figure-head in whose name to act, for Brooklyn Liberation “trans of color” operates akin to how Jian Nao Chen puts it in *Trans Exploits*: “potential points of solidarity and kinship between those who experience embodiment as a form of racial gender displacement and subjugation within radically different *yet interrelated* transnational US histories and systems of genocide, captivity, colonization, and imperialism.” As Chen incisively observes of this coalitional modality, “trans of color expressions and practices use the *surplus* that constitutes racial gender embodiment as material for social struggle, reconstruction, and transformation.”³⁰

The ignition of a heterogenous surplus into coalitional politics ties “trans of color” to Black feminist traditions that have long treated intersectionality as a matter not of flattening difference into a shared umbrella interest, but strategic alliance. Critiquing idealization, the Combahee River Collective’s landmark 1977 statement “reject[s] pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind” not for separatism or the ideological purity of one struggle over all others, but rather “us[ing] our position at the bottom ... [to] leap into revolutionary action” with other movements. As the collective famously puts it, “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression.”³¹

This complexity of this sentence has perhaps been poorly read by intersectional queer and trans studies scholarship that idealizes the trans woman of color. As Cathy Cohen helpfully reminds in “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” which cites Combahee as one of its reference points:

One of the most difficult tasks in such an endeavor (and there are many) is not to forsake the complexities of both how power is structured and how we might think about the coalitions we create. Far too often movements revert to a position in which membership and joint political work are based upon a necessarily similar history of oppression ... Instead, I am suggesting that the process of movement building be rooted not in our shared history or identity, but in our shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges.³²

Much like Cohen’s critique of queer politics as having reified a single-axis opposition to heterosexuality, ignoring vast swaths of people for whom heterosexuality is not a material privilege for reasons of race and class, when “trans” is reified along the single-axis of gender by using the idealization of the trans woman of color as its intersectional alibi, the word trans presumes yet again that “a necessarily similar history of oppression” is what drives successful political organizing, meaning that whoever’s life stories don’t conform to that history will be disregarded. Considering that the organizing practiced by Brooklyn Liberation and many other contemporary Black trans feminist groups is indebted to strategic coalition—STAR, likewise, did not imagine itself as separatist, even in relation to gay liberation, and actively sought alliance with the Black Power movement, the Young Lords, and Third World internationalism—part of the shift I would like to see in queer and trans studies is taking this critique as the starting point for a deidealized approach to trans of color knowledge that apprentices itself in the critical study of many actually existing Black trans political, intellectual, and aesthetic movements.

28.3 Conclusion: lost in the music

Given that much of the idealization of the trans woman of color by queer and trans studies renders her an aesthetic, or performative subject, it may appear like my argument in this chapter

restages a tired antinomy between material struggle and the aesthetic. On the contrary, I find the rich political and historical work by Black trans women artists, poets, and organizers today to be a rich field of deidealized projects adequate to the complexity and value of what has been too easily papered over since the 1970s in the name of political didacticism. This chapter takes one of its cues from poet jayy dodd's lines on idealization in *The Black Condition, Ft. Narcissus*: "imagine being an angel / could also mean being trapped, / like prisoners to the gods."³³

Interdisciplinary artist, writer, and activist Tourmaline's archival and aesthetic work on Marsha P. Johnson forms another important line of inquiry into deidealizing Black trans women and mobilizing history for ends other than figuring political desires that cannot actually be found in the past. Having undertaken the painstaking labor of locating and digitizing a range of archival materials on Johnson, Tourmaline's work has been stolen to produce marketable versions of trans history, most notably in David France's *The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017), which was picked up by Netflix.³⁴ In marked contrast to that documentary, Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel's *Happy Birthday Marsha!* (2018) happily defies genre and ownership. The 15-minute film is one of the most deeply researched engagements with Johnson's life to date, based not just in Tourmaline's exhaustive archival work, but in casting several of Johnson's closest friends in the 1970s.³⁵ The fabulated plot imagines, with no pretension to accuracy, that Johnson's birthday fell on the same night as the Stonewall Riots in 1969, so that her interiority and expressive life, on which the film lingers through a saturated palette of pinks, blues, and greens, is tied inexorably to the political import of the night. After no one shows up to her party, Johnson heads to the Stonewall Inn to perform a poem (written by Cyrus Dunham, who plays her friend Junior) in which she expressly refuses her idealization: "If I wanted to be a saint, I'd be loyal to the law and not the queens in the park."³⁶

Perhaps the most forceful aspect of the film's imaginative crossing of space and time through openly mixing fabulation and historicity comes in interspersed footage of Johnson being interviewed by Andy Warhol. In sparkling black and white, Johnson riffs and extemporizes in a way that is unmistakably trippy—or tripping, more likely—frustrating any demand from the film or audience for authenticity or *verité*. Rather than juxtaposing the enigma of Johnson's archival existence with an idealized fantasy of what could have been that would compensate for its incompleteness, *Happy Birthday Marsha!* revels in the pleasure of historical foreclosure for such a legendary Black trans woman. In a key moment from the interview footage, Johnson appears to speak almost prehensively to the viewer, as if she were a seer who had a sense outside of the usual confines of linear time that her likeness and memory would one day be flattened by idealization. "I got lost in the music in 1963 at Stonewall" she cheers, before drifting off elliptically for a moment. "No! No," she continues, working it out,

it was Stonewall—it was 1967 that I got lost. In 19—oh my dear, Stonewall, I got lost at Stonewall. Heard it through the grapevine. 1969! I got lost in the music and I couldn't get out. Still can't get out of the music.

Tourmaline and Wortzel's approach to narrative form lets this moment spill across the rest of their film, suggesting that the aesthetic force transmitted by this slice of Johnson's life—lost in the music, as any fan of disco might recognize—is neither a fall from the strictly political meaning of Stonewall, nor its final redemption for those who live in its aftermath. What remains enigmatic is preserved precisely in its lush opacity, a testament to Johnson not as a saint, but someone whose experience and actions cannot be fully assimilated into anything that she herself was not a part of. The saturated aesthetic landscape of the film, which comes through as much in Mya Taylor's voice in playing Johnson as in its sparkling, colorful palette, speaks to

the resplendent quality of deidealizing the Black trans woman. My claim about *Happy Birthday Marsha!* is, both polemically and humbly, that it is lightyears ahead of the kind of queer and trans scholarship that claims to practice intersectionality in the name of the figural version of Johnson. I do not see this as a problem, necessarily. If scholarly work is unable to reckon with its own unreconstructed idealizations, then perhaps it is simply fated to fade into obscurity while more promising arrangements of research, politics, and pleasure endure. Much like the way that Brooklyn Liberation and other Black trans feminist organizations have continued their organizing and mutual aid work despite the liberal incorporation of the trans woman of color as a figure in empty neoliberal trans politics, the failures of scholarship to live up to the world are ours, not the world's. If anything, perhaps the lesson here is that scholars might want to spend more time considering why we feel the urgent need to idealize our work into a world-saving and transformational grammar at every turn, as if there is no other legitimate goal to producing critical, intersectional knowledge. Whatever Marsha meant to say about getting lost in the music, it is beautiful in part because it was not for us to know.

Notes

- 1 Tourmaline, "Filmmaker and Activist Tourmaline on How to Freedom Dream," *Vogue*, July 2, 2020, www.vogue.com/article/filmmaker-and-activist-tourmaline-on-how-to-freedom-dream.
- 2 "Back Matter," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22, 3 (2016).
- 3 On the prescribed antinomy between Black publicity and interiority, see Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, None edition (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2012).
- 4 On the central role of allegory in figuring trans femininity, see Emma Heaney, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory*, first edition (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017).
- 5 See, for examples that I will return to in this chapter, José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, first edition (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). In one of the most absurd Pride hagiographies to date, Salesforce paid tribute to Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson as leaders for corporate workplace policy: Sahara Ali, "9 LGBTQ+ Women Who've Led the Way for the Next Generation," *The 360 Blog from Salesforce* (blog), June 11, 2021, www.salesforce.com/blog/lgbtq-women-trailblazers-pride/.
- 6 See Miss Major's trenchant analysis of Cox and the tipping point in "Cautious Living: Black Trans Women and the Politics of Documentation," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, Miss Major and CeCe McDonald in conversation with Toshio Meronek, edited by Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., Illustrated edition (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017).
- 7 Eva S. Hayward, "Don't Exist," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, 2 (May 1, 2017): 191–4, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3814985>.
- 8 Tourmaline, Eric Stanley, and Johanna Burton, "Known Unknowns: An Introduction to Trap Door," in *Trap Door*, xv–xxvi.
- 9 C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, edited by Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 66–76.
- 10 Lee Brewster, *From the Queens Liberation Front* 1, 3 (1974), 1. ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.
- 11 "Y'all Better Quiet Down." *Issuu*, accessed September 15, 2021, https://issuu.com/shadesofnoir/docs/peekaboo_we_see_you_whiteness/s/151964.
- 12 Martin Duberman, *Stonewall: The Definitive Story of the LGBTQ Rights Uprising That Changed America*, Illustrated edition (New York, NY: Plume, 2019).
- 13 Of course, there are other genealogies to transgender, such as in the work of Leslie Feinberg, or early vocabularies of "transgenderists" from the 1970s, but none have had the demonstrable impact in wide-spread uptake as this social service and NGO version.

- 14 David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*, Illustrated edition (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 15 Jessi Gan, “‘Still at the Back of the Bus’: Sylvia Rivera’s Struggle,” *Centro Journal* 19, 1 (2007), 292.
- 16 Eva Hayward, “Lessons from a Starfish,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, edited by Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 181.
- 17 CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies, *Kessler Lecture 2020: Roderick Ferguson*, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIpMF_Wmddy.
- 18 Ferguson, “Kessler Lecture.”
- 19 Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2018).
- 20 Treva Ellison et al., “We Got Issues: Toward a Black Trans*/Studies,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, 2 (May 1, 2017): 162–9, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3814949>.
- 21 Though we might grant that queer of color studies has had a decidedly autoethnographic bent, however informal and unnamed, perhaps beginning with Muñoz’s *Disidentifications*, where there is a sense that theory is being produced out of communities in which the author is a member.
- 22 See, for example, Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*, Illustrated edition (Ann Arbor, MI: UMPRE, 2013); Lucinda Ramberg, *Given to the Goddess: South Indian Devadasis and the Sexuality of Religion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2014); Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, first edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005). On the contemporary methodological orientation of trans studies, see Susan Stryker, “Introduction: Trans* Studies Now,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, 3 (August 1, 2020): 299–305.
- 23 Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2019).
- 24 Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2017).
- 25 “BROOKLYN LIBERATION,” Statement of Intent, accessed September 15, 2021, www.brooklyn-liberation.com/.
- 26 Jules Gill-Peterson, “On Killing Trans Children,” *THE FUNAMBULIST MAGAZINE*, August 31, 2021, <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/against-genocide/on-killing-trans-children>.
- 27 See, for example, ACLU, *Missouri Dad Testifies Against Trans Youth Athlete Ban*, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=h60YLGDJ6n0.
- 28 Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011).
- 29 Brooklyn Liberation, “Statement of Intent.”
- 30 Jian Neo Chen, *Trans Exploits: Trans of Color Cultures and Technologies in Movement* (Durham and London: Duke University Press Books, 2019), 4–5, emphases in original.
- 31 Combahee River Collective, “The Combahee River Collective Statement” (Black Past, 1977), www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/.
- 32 Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3 (1997), 458.
- 33 jayy dodd, *The Black Condition, Ft. Narcissus* (Nightboat Books, 2019).
- 34 Jeffrey J. Iovannone, “Should Netflix Viewers Boycott The Death and Life of Marsha P. Johnson?,” *Queer History For the People* (blog), May 30, 2019, <https://medium.com/queer-history-for-the-people/should-netflix-viewers-boycott-the-death-and-life-of-marsha-p-johnson-cdf0a4057217>.
- 35 Sessi Kuwabara Blanchard, “Marsha P. Johnson’s LGBTQ Legacy Is About How She Lived Her Life, Too,” accessed September 15, 2021, www.vice.com/en/article/594aq8/marsha-p-johnson-happy-birthday-marsha-transgender-rights.
- 36 Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel, *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (Frontline, 2018).

INSURGENT TRANS STUDY

Radical trans feminism meets intersectionality

Marquis Bey

Be sure, reader, that my aim in this chapter—brief as it is, provocative, to some, as it is—is not to malign that which many hold sacred. My aim, instead, is to generate a different way to encounter one another, or my aim is to cultivate room for different subjectivities given to radically different encounters. Or something like this. Put succinctly, I asseverate a radical project manifesting as a steadfast yet compassionate departure from the sway intersectionality has over how one frames and architecturalizes subjectivity and social encounter. That is, for this chapter, the project at hand is a radical one, a radicality that manifests as a departure from the known and congealed that have masqueraded as all we have for ourselves. Such a radicality is gifted by an analytic transness steadfast about the concerted interrogation of the very texture of our subjective and socio-historical relations to the world and each other. I have as my aim, then, something that moves in excess of common instantiations of intersectionality, wherein, on one reading, the parameters of identities are presumed natural and discrete and immutable. Instead, this chapter argues that transness and the politics it proliferates in fact suggest a marked denaturalizing of subjective transparency. To take *trans* seriously is to refuse to concede that one knows the make-up of the identificatory intersections, that one can access the contours of its road lines and highway signage; trans, taken seriously, entails the refusal of accurate knowledge being able to be gleaned from making recourse to the visual precisely because transness implies the vitiation of the visual as the determinant of subjective truth.

As I tell my students, it is crucial, always, to delineate as much as one can the definition and intended use of operative terms. Thus, I do so here. If the term around which I, and the contributors of this volume, gather is “intersectionality”; it is imperative that I make clear how it is that I am understanding it. Such a project might seem tedious or even unnecessary in the context of its usage pervading even laypersons’ homes. However, perhaps that pervasiveness is part of the issue. With the insertion of philosophical, radical, or politicized concepts into the mainstream, there is often a dilution that happens. So I intend here to briefly sketch how I understand intersectionality, which will then aid in the clarity of the rationale behind my departure from it.

We know already that it is a term coined by legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw. God, do we know, from all the mentions, all the articles and blog pieces and think pieces and tweets, that

intersectionality is coined by Crenshaw. We know, okay?¹ But nevertheless, alas, a definition. Intersectionality references the ways that identities do not affect their subjects one axis at a time but simultaneously. That is, one might move through the world or experience discrimination along the axes, simultaneously, of race *and* gender (*and* class, etc.). It is a lens through which to more clearly see what has occurred, how power interacts and collides and, as the term implies, intersects. “It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there,” Crenshaw says in an interview, but that all of these problems can be happening at the same time, compounding one another, multiplicatively and qualitatively rather than simply additively.² Primarily, intersectionality is a framework that has been used to highlight the status and oppression of Black women, who were and are subject to being overlooked because they do not fall neatly into being affected by racism *or* sexism. An intersectional experience, Crenshaw says, is greater than an additive sum of racism and sexism, more than just race plus gender.

On the one hand, it is quite lucid to me why many have come to utilize the phrase “If your feminism isn’t intersectional, it doesn’t mean shit” (or any number of variations of this phrase). My departure emerges from, decidedly, trans studies and more specifically an insurrectionary trans theorization I am tentatively calling trans study: trans study, that is, by way of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s articulation of Black study, as something invitational, radically open and dispossessively nonproprietary, non-exclusionary, such that study becomes this open terrain of opening terrains. Trans study as an interrogation of how knowledge is formed, who forms it, the congealing of knowledge and the subjects and bodies that attach to it. Surely, trans studies and Black studies, or trans studies and intersectionality, or trans studies and Black feminism, are not mutually exclusive—indeed, I have an entire monograph attesting to their imbrications.³ There is, however, a beautifully generative radicality in what I find as trans study’s commitment to two things in particular: first, its staunch critique of the given. One of the most fundamental and primordial modes of subjectivity forced upon us—that of gender, assigned perinatally (not to the exclusion of other modes, like race, for example)—so often is permitted to simply run rampant. But trans study maintains an enthusiasm as to the possibilities of life and subjectivity not beholden to even that which is presumed natural for us to be. Second, its commitment to movement. I’ve mentioned time and again to friends and colleagues the notion of working the trapped that we are inevitably in. I have come to this phrase by way of Judith Butler, who came to it by way of Foucault, and it seems to me that its utility lies, of course, in its face value: that though we might feel “trapped” in our bodies, in structural and institutional frameworks, in histories, we can still work within them, we can still be *certain kinds* of bodies, certain kinds of subjects in relation to systems and structures. In other words, to be deemed, say, a woman means of course that one is subject to various iterations of sexism, but it also means that one can be or is *this* kind of women or *that* kind of woman; one is not overdetermined in their womanhood and disallowed from moving within that subject position in certain ways. Additionally, however, I like to think that working the trap that we are inevitably in also means that we work the trap itself—perhaps so much so that the trap dissolves, loses a few screws and bolts, gets rusted, and perhaps falls apart such that our working, say, again, of womanhood means that we work so much and in such ways that we are no longer, and no longer have to be, women. And what a glorious thing that might be.

The remainder of this chapter will then take on three different concepts that seem implicit to intersectionality—and indeed to contemporary social justice work and politics of the Left in general—and provide the grounds on which trans study moves away from, oppositional to, or generatively against the grain of them. Those concepts are categoricity, monolithism, and the visual or representation.

29.1 Kant's nightmare

When we want to imagine *otherwise* possibilities—*otherwise* worlds—we must abolish the very conceptual frame that produces categorical distinction and makes them desirable.

—Ashon Crawley, “Stayed | Freedom | Hallelujah”

Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* introduced Western philosophy to what he terms the categorical imperative (CI). Admittedly, I am slightly decontextualizing Kant, making the CI do slightly different work or signify slightly differently than originally intended, so I hope that's cool with y'all. Nevertheless, the CI, in Kant's view, is a fundamental principle of reason in its purest form positing the most objective, unconditional, and necessary course of action for all agents of rationality as an imperative for morality as such. It is imperative insofar as it is required of all who might be subject to it (rational agents, for Kant); it is imperative in that one cannot opt out of it simply because one does not wish to follow it. In turn, it is categorical insofar as it is unconditional in the sense that antecedent conditions or desires or wills or preferences matter not—it applies to any and all rational agents, no exception. As Kant put it, the categorical imperative “declares an action to be objectively necessary of itself without reference to any purpose—that is, even without any further end”; it “commands a certain line of conduct directly, without assuming or being conditional on any further goal to be reached by that conduct.”⁴ Now, here in the present chapter we are not talking about moral imperatives per se, so in this sense I am being unfaithful to Kant's intentions. I think I can be excused for this; my readers, I'm guessing, are not all that concerned with maintaining any kind of ethical fidelity to Kant. I reference Kant because of the utility of the phrase, its felicitous relevance to where I wish to place my critique. It strikes me that there is a sneaking imperative embedded in intersectional calls for acknowledging privileges, identities, and the like. One must, it seems, continue to give an account of oneself—to use the Butlerian language—*on the terms of* that which bestowed the violence of one's positioning, and indeed the violence of positioning itself. One must make recourse to the categorization and that making recourse is imperative if one is to be a proper user of intersectionality. In short, there is little room to critique or undermine the very categorizations themselves, making the Kantian link starkest: if the Kantian CI dictates that one cannot opt out of the law (the imperative) and the law must apply to all said to be under its helm (the categorical), then I put forth that one is disallowed from opting out of needing to be, with all its archival political investments and power plays, a legible race (on the valuative taxonomic scale instantiated by white supremacy) and gender (always in relation to, and deemed valuable on the grounds of, a cisnormative binaristic standard of needing to be a gendered subject in the first place). I put forth that the sentiment within work done through intersectionalist frameworks requires that one be this or that race or gender (among a variety, of course, of other identity vectors) and that everyone be subject to those frameworks. My gender abolitionist and trans-insurgent politics simply cannot get behind such a project.

If I may make recourse to another philosopher, a one Jacques Derrida, there is utility in the critique not just of particular categories—the big bad categories, which allow all the other good categories to remain, for they are innocent (though we have known, since 1963, Baldwin's warning about innocence)⁵—but to critique categorization itself, for categoricity as such is a violence. Trans study, I submit, attempts to highlight this, for *trans* is the “enigmatic structure” that is much less a structure and more of a formless form, an interrogation of and irreverence toward form, that is violated by legibility's need to map itself onto all things if they are to be understood as things. If trans announces a break from and skepticism toward the categories

bestowed upon us, categories we have deemed so natural and unmediated that they simply are, it converses intimately with the Derridean *khôra*, too “indeterminate to have any ‘generic,’” which is to say ontologically or socially legible, “determination at all, or to have anything at all to do with ‘generation,’ so that perhaps *khôra* ‘signal[s] toward a genre beyond genre,’ perhaps ‘beyond categorial oppositions, which in the first place allow it to be approached or said.’”⁶ I am holding here that categoricity, or the demand to adhere to a categorization in order to exist as such, as well as the assumption of the innocence of the categories (even if maligned and marginalized), is the often overlooked and uncritiqued bedrock on which I have set my sights. I find in trans studies and trans study the move to examine and, in more radical corners, abolish the very penchant for categorization.

Intersectionality upholds many of the categories that have been bestowed, seeking primarily to revalue them rather than, more usefully to me, dissolve their hold and remove their necessity. The imposition of a certain way to be is indeed one aspect of violence and a significant one to boot. Also violative is the imposition itself: to *have to be* not even a “certain” way but a “way” at all, needing to be inaugurated through this vector—race, gender, etc.—in order to be said to appear or exist at all. In that is ontological violence, for it disallows and deems pathological, nonexistent, other kinds of being that might have been possible for us. What intrigues me here, then, is the originary question rather than a second-order question, as it were, a second-order that posits itself as originary or first-order, assuming that the orders preceding it are mainstays, natural facts, unalterable. This, to me, epitomizes a kind of cisnormativity and biological essentialism, which I take up more in the concluding section.

A departure from categoricity, from a differently, perhaps perversely inflected Kantian categorical imperative, invites a cool side-eye when it comes to the categories we’ve been made to bear for our conception of ourselves as “I.” That side-eye is encapsulated by T. Fleischmann, who says in *Time Is a Thing a Body Moves Through*, “But anyway, who wants a title? So claustrophobic, when I’d rather just float away in the parenthetical, or jump right in.” Fleischmann continues, 19 pages later in a kind of continuation of the thought, or a backtracking to give the reasoning behind their preference for floating, “Categorization isn’t how we acknowledge difference but rather its enforcement, difference leveraged to keep things apart that could well be together.”⁷ The very nominative of, say, Black woman, understood identifierily—I *am* a Black woman, ontologically, fundamentally; that which I do is done through, as it were, Black womanhood as it has been given as an identificatory status—in fact curtails any other possibilities for one to be. It instantiates immutability as one’s ontological lot, requiring contentment with the ways that lot is imbued with meanings and histories, sure, but also requiring that one cannot be otherwise than what has been hegemonically deemed *able to be one’s lot*. Fleischmann’s preferential floating in parentheticals is a desire to “be” antecategorical, to emerge through that which is cast aside in order for the rest to come through as existent. The categorical, even when a marginalized category, is an enforcement, not merely an acknowledgement. To presume that it is simple description, simple assessment of fixed furniture in the onto-epistemic landscape marks a capitulation to the project of Western civilization and its implication of its partial logics as instead natural, divine, determined. In other spheres, this is called white supremacy, cisnormativity, patriarchy.

Therefore, insurgent trans study takes on the tenor, unapologetically so, of trans as an analytic critique generative of a different modality for us to inhabit, exhibit, or refuse altogether. Not the name for an actualized physical compartment, trans works as a working. It is dynamic, agential in excess of the given parameters of the space in which agency is undertaken. Thus, there is a departure from bedrock tenets of intersectionality precisely on the grounds that it reiterates rather than undermines the skeletal structure of the categorizing project that inheres, funda-

mentally, in hegemony. “Trans is thus a dynamic formation,” write Nat Raha and Mijke van der Drift in “Radical Transfeminism,”

which does not lay a claim to simply *be*, but which functions by disrupting static categories of being. As a form of refusal this entails claiming a difference of being, without necessarily leading to a separation with other forms of life. There is no being left behind; indeed, the separation of categories is put in question. Trans emerges from its negation, its refusal, through a flight from the world of norms, as an indeterminate affirmation of life. This means, siding with Denise Ferreira da Silva, that trans formative practices do not need to lean on categorical differences, which imply and demand separability ... Trans as dynamic formation proposes a negation of the categorical separation of differences, and thus an affirmation of possible alignments, coalitions, and formations beyond the current static order of visual and capitalist dispossession. Trans is thus a claim to categorical change, which entails a change in the status of how categories are understood to operate. Trans is not only a practice, but, in its epistemic commitments, also a praxis of changing ethics and the analytics through which these operate.⁸

Let us not simply lay claim to being but instead disrupt the categorical as a desirable modality of subjectivation. Taxonomic adherence is still a norm, and hence a violence, in addition to the violence that occurs after the categorical uptake. To transform these tendencies via coalitions and justice-oriented ethics we need not, we learn from da Silva, lean on categorical differences. The impulse of the departure from intersectionalist axioms is pulsated by Raha’s and van der Drift’s “turn away from encapsulations of liberal inclusion,” which seek reform within the extant categorization, in favor of allowing “new forms of life emerge.” This kind of trans, one of committed refusal even of the things deemed unable to be refused, brings forth significantly altered relational modes.⁹ Are we fearful of those new modes?

29.2 Conspiratorial uncertainties

interrogations advanced by LGBTQ/differently abled historical subjects whose inquiries have shattered our working assumptions; we now have to start from a different vantage—“women” and “men” in all the porosity of gender signature so that we “start” from a vantage of uncertainty or do not know where a path will lead until we reach it!

—*Hortense Spillers, “Expostulations and Replies”*

I must be very clear from the jump. None of the forthcoming, nor the preceding, is to say anything like individualism. Individualism and individuation—the attempted violent extrication of oneself from the togetherness constitutive of life and sustainability—in fact vehicularize the categorical, I would wager, in order to instantiate discretion, which then facilitates the possibility of a presumptive singularity, which is, further still, another way to say “identity.” What I offer in this section is a critique of the monolithism enabled by categoricity precisely because monolithism is the attempt to individuate the categorical.

There is a pervasive tendency to offer Black women as the end-all be-all when it comes to intersectionality. When I speak to my students, for example, whenever conversation concerning intersectionality arises, it is so very often reduced to the naming of Black women, the detailing of the ways Black women have been historically and contemporarily maligned and oppressed, and then the inverse articulation of all that Black women have to say on the subjects of race and

gender automatically right, correct, and valid over and against any thinking put forth by others. It is not that one is not granted a kind of knowledge by virtue of one's marginal positioning; that Black feminist "distinct angle of vision" bears utility, and has led to some quite useful analyses of the social landscape. Situatedness and positioning, however, do not bear the weight of divinity, which I know y'all will emphatically agree with in theory, yet it is often much more reticently put forth in settings that demand for its interrogative heft. One need only go on Twitter and see the numerous tweets about listening to Black women or the ways that Black women's lived experience is used as intellectual impenetrability. It is a situated knowledge, yet "To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic," Donna Haraway writes,

even if "we" "naturally" inhabit the great underground terrain of subjugated knowledges. The positionings of the subjugated are not exempt from critical reexamination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation; that is, from both semiological and hermeneutic modes of critical inquiry. The standpoints of the subjugated are not "innocent" positions.¹⁰

What I am thus offering is trans as a fracture in "we-ness" and in fact a deep suspicion of discourses of we-ness insofar as trans insurgency does not allow for such easy "we" identifications on the grounds of the somatic, the epidermal, the gendered, precisely because those very axes of identification are constitutive of, and often obscure, their own violence. The fracturing is not so much a bloc busting as much as it is an interrogation of how the bloc is formed, who is included in—or rather, not excluded from—the bloc, what the bloc does, and what the bloc might be able to be if it didn't have to be a bloc to be legible as a politicized force.

At base, this is an exploration into the second of Jennifer Nash's fourfold argument in "Re-thinking Intersectionality": that of the ways that "black women" operate, by virtue of their blackness and womanness, as prototypically intersectional. Nash writes,

The problems with a theoretical reliance on black women's experiences are two-fold. First, while seeking to underscore problems of exclusion within feminist and anti-racist theory, black women are treated as a unitary and monolithic entity. That is, differences between black women, including class and sexuality[,] are obscured in the service of presenting "black women" as a category that opposes both "whites" and "black men."

Second, in defining intersectionality as an analytic tool that "... denote[s] the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's ... experiences," intersectionality recycles black feminism without demonstrating what new tools it brings to black feminism to help it fashion a more complex theory of identity.¹¹

What trans study offers is a more complex theory of identity—one that vitiates it.

Take Spillers's epigraph at the outset of this section. It is, in large part, interrogations advanced by LGBT subjects—which I have argued elsewhere is fundamentally advanced by the acronymic "T"—that have shattered our working assumptions. One of those working assumptions, I submit, is the utility of intersectionality and, relatedly, the naturalness of the identities that make up those intersections. The different vantage Spillers remarks that we must begin from is one in which we cannot take those identities as given, as immovable mainstays to be grudgingly accepted; rather, they are to be interrogated, displaced perhaps—originarily displaced, I would argue, wherein such an originary displacement is a displacement of the penchant for racialized or gendered distinction along normative lines; a displacement of "the pertinence of traditional

ontology” such that “simple yes/no or either/or question will simply not suffice to situate this identity,” all identities and identification which insurgent trans study indexically troubles, or shows as troubled, “or determine the sense of identification of this being.”¹² I am indeed arguing for a quite different vantage than that which we are used to, a vantage that, reading the insurgent transitivity Spillers evokes, places “woman” and “men” under scrutinizing interrogation so much so that our starting place for these potent social subjects and consequently all social subjects is radically, wondrously uncertain.

I have said it before, but I’ll say it again, hopefully more clearly than when I’ve said it before. Identity is not innocent. It is not an ethical imperative nor is it inevitable. Identity is a philosophical project that permits one to exist on the plane of sociality to the extent that one adheres to its logics of appearance. It touts itself as natural, or if not natural, necessary. Rather than being understood in this way, one must think of identity as a kind of everyday language, an assumed common sense that makes things make sense in a certain way such that its everydayness, its commonality, is rendered “not innocent or neutral.” Indeed, “It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries within it ... presuppositions of all types.”¹³ Arrived at via insurgent trans study is a kind of apostatic position, wherein the apostasy is in relation to the divinity imbued in the assumption of identity’s virtue. The apostatic position is one that holds identity’s deep connection to “the body,” which is the raw material, so to speak, for attaching identities. However, the body is not a site of somatic neutrality; it is a site of constraint and authorization; it *is* constraint and authorization. Too, identity, again that philosophical project of being permitted to come onto the scene only after a massively violent severance from the very things you could have been, is the scene of the crime and not to be coveted, not to be made recourse to in order to redress those crimes, for identity, which might be to say the meanings attached to the perception of the body as raw, unmediated material, is a nonconsensual imposition. One might say that identity and its “fascistic” meaning (à la Barthes) papers over what and who and how we could have been inasmuch as it determines us before we can determine ourselves, before we can determine to be determined or not; identity, at base, “bids us recognize ourselves, and be perpetually recognized, in very specific ways,” ways that make impossible other, unspecific ways, where unspecific ways are indexical in, precisely, the trans.¹⁴

So what ought we to do? The question is often raised and, while taking numerous forms, usually sounds something like, “Okay, so without any kind of identity, what do we have?” And my response is this: *everything else*.

The presumption and implication of monolithism does not serve us in the end. It is not only disingenuous but it is also not, I don’t think, the avenue through which radical world-making happens. It does not permit the kind of conspiratorial leaning we must have to do the radicality we profess. If the presumption and implication of monolithism is a presumption and implication of sameness even in marginality, even in professed service of a different valuative schema, they offer only complicity in the end. Complicity not of the same caliber or bearing the same effects, though complicity in bolstering the architectural frame of the very things from which we seek extrication. What would happen if we sought instead to make another kind of self by unmaking ourselves, refusing to accept the ways they made us—indeed, the ways they made the very concept of what could be “us,” which is also to say the ways they said we could not be us in so many other ways. Conspiring against the machine that makes monolithism desirable is a dangerous invocation, blessedly so, of the kinds of fugitive, insurgent work that makes necessary relationality on grounds open, mutinously available to all. We conspire away from monolithism because it too stringently requires accepting the logics and demographics and formative violences, disallowing the variation and riffing and subverting and undermining of the vectors along which we might come together and be together. So the conspiracy is against ourselves,

for “ourselves” is not us, not what we could have been, not what we might become, only what we couldn’t not be. Insurgent trans study, in its cold shoulder to the solidity of the identitarian because it has already peeped that that’s not a good look especially for those who seek abolitionist futures and radical subjectivities, invents new forms of what sociality can mean and look like. It comes together with others who are departing from the given, seeking the unknown and uncapturable, and it comes together by way of and because of the departure and seeking. The form cannot be known in advance because, perhaps, there is no form, no way to assert a wholeness ahead of itself to fulfill some agenda by the lights of the hegemon. We needn’t play by those rules, even if of a darker hue. Without rules, then we can actually begin to play.

29.3 Seeing is belying

I explain my gender by saying I am happiest on the road when I’m not here or there, but in between, that yellow line coming down the center of it all like a goddamn sunbeam.

—*Andrea Gibson, Take Me with You*

Insurgent trans study insists on the ethical necessity of refusing the buttressing of the visual registers as determinative of subjective, ontological, or epistemological truth. Trans’s operation as a movement that cannot be encapsulated, to use Raha and van der Drift’s terminology, by normative frameworks, its operation as blurring the very poles of origin and destination, entails a rebuking of the perception that the vectors constituting identity—namely “race” and “gender”—are fixed and knowable in any instance. So the final departure I wish to notate is a kind of evanescing of the visual register, even when we might assume the obviousness of the visual’s veracity. I argue that because even, say, transsexual women, as Susan Stryker argues, are “in practice, unavoidably gender nonconforming, genderqueer, and nonbinary,” intersectionality often cannot account for the being of multiple things *in the same identificatory category at the same time*—that trans women can also be genderqueer and nonbinary and, transantagonistically, “men” all at the same time. There is present a “never aligning” that Stryker notes which I make use of in my thinking of transness, the offering of the salvific deliverance, if you will, of never aligning because alignment is to adhere to the extant registers that dole out the violence.¹⁵

To be truthful, there is a muted and not so muted biological essentialism and determinism in some articulations of intersectionality, or at least in some articulations of how we ought to understand and relate to our and others’ identities when attempting to promote justice. Under the guise of making (ethical, just) recourse to embodiment, the body, race, perceived gender and its attending necessary privileges there is what lila lavender incisively deems a biological fetishization. A project of insurgent trans study, or radical transfeminism which I also find to be an accurate characterization, cannot abide even well-meaning appeals to biology. Even as many radical social justice activists and thinkers (who go by many names: Black feminists, decolonial theorists, abolitionists, etc.) rightfully critique the medical industrial complex and the numerous ways scientific practices have proved detrimental to Black, queer, trans, and of color people, there is still a latent acceptance of its logics. To make unimpeachable the necessity of acknowledging one’s “obvious” “male privilege” does not only operate on an intended recognition of social benefits that accrue along certain bodily configurations; it also emphasizes the purported reality of such a person being “male” irrespective of their subjective and ontological irreverence. To be clear, spoken of here is less a rebuking of privileges granted to specific kinds of bodies and more rebuking of the interdiction of it being possible to assert a different emergent subjectivity that does not have to be wrapped back into the folds of biological determinism or biologically ori-

ented/dictated semiotic articulations. Because it stands that the assertion of, say, the nonbinary person's male privilege, or the non-op trans woman's male privilege on the grounds that others will read their bodies in ways that read "male," is an undermining of gender self-determination; a conferral onto hegemony and normativity—which is then to say, white supremacy, transantagonism, and patriarchy—the authority to provide the ultimate last word, the "truth" of how one is to be understood; and a sly agreement with the cisnormative idea that biology, biological comportment, genitals, morphology, and reproductive capacity is your real social standing.

lavender puts this critique quite incisively. She writes that biology as a project is transantagonistic and cannot be reconciled with radical transfeminism. The radical transfeminism she advocates, and the insurgent trans study concerning this chapter, "necessitate the complete dissolution of biology as a somaontological technology." Biology, in other words, is a technology of bodily circumscription and technology of dictating what bodies can mean, how they can appear, what kinds of things accrue onto them, and what modes of relationality are said to be possible with them. She puts it most forcefully when noting "biologization as the creation of the anatomical regime in which bodies become understood only through sexology, through the reduction of genital life down to the signifiers of penis and vagina."¹⁶ This is to say, in a conclusive flourish, intersectional mandates rely on "the body" as legible through normative understandings of it, too often reduced to sexological understandings. This has the effect of making the justice-oriented project of intersectionality complicit in biological essentialism, determinism, and transantagonism inasmuch as it makes ethically imperative a contentment with the more "real" ways one's body is read by "them"—a "them" that will read nonbinary people as simply "men" or "women," and trans women as "men."

What I have tried to articulate here is a marked critique, though a loving one, of intersectionality in service of a trans-insurgent future. Insurgent trans study cares little for the ways that we "must" reckon with "reality" because reality is often a masquerade for the normative axes along which social intelligibility and life happen; reality disallows radical imaginations of abolition, in other words. So, it is the project of insurgent trans study to think concertedly about how to refuse the frankly reformist ways that many assert intersectionality as a modality of installing justice. There is no salvation ultimately in maintaining the given categories, for the categorical imperative—the demand to be one of the paltry options granted to us, which often are not options freely chosen but requirements—nor is there salvation ultimately in mobilizing a demographic as the individuated group that will deliver us from evil. Salvation, if such a word is appropriate, which it may not be, comes in insurgency: rebuke the order itself and all its skeletal structures holding it upright. We will fall to the ground, surely, and the plummet may hurt. We may not know how to move without muscles and bones and nervous systems. But so what? We might evolve into creatures that will soon fly.

Notes

- 1 I know, too, that there is a sense of citational politics in all of this as well. We cite and cite, and remind and remind, because of the politics of citation—that who we cite amplifies voices, that so often the voices amplified are white dudes and not Black women. All of this is cool. But still, we know that Kim Crenshaw "coined" intersectionality and you are not sufficiently, or even remotely, woke or astute or finished with the work just because you took the time to say it. Yes, reader, someone has hit a nerve.
- 2 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later," June 8, 2017, www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality-more-two-decades-later#:~:text=Crenshaw%3A%20Intersectionality%20is%20a%20lens,class%20or%20LBGTQ%20problem%20there.
- 3 See Marquis Bey's *Black Trans Feminism* (Duke University Press, 2022).

- 4 Cited in Robert Johnson and Adam Cureton, “Kant’s Moral Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2019 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/kant-moral/>.
- 5 From the opening letter to his nephew in *The Fire Next Time*, in which Baldwin writes, famously, “It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.”
- 6 Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida, With a New Introduction*, edited by John D. Caputo, 2020, 85, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823290680>.
- 7 T. Fleischmann, *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through* (Coffee House Press, 2019), 41, 60.
- 8 Mijka van der Drift and Nat Raha, “Radical Transfeminism: Trans as Anti-Static Ethics Escaping Neoliberal Encapsulation,” in *The New Feminist Literary Studies*, edited by Jennifer Cooke, Twenty-First-Century Critical Revisions (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108599504>. Emphasis in original.
- 9 Van der Drift and Raha, “Radical Transfeminism,” 21.
- 10 Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 584, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.
- 11 Jennifer C. Nash, “Re-Thinking Intersectionality,” *Feminist Review* 89, no. 1 (June 1, 2008): 8–9, <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2008.4>. Nash writes too, a page before this, “While Crenshaw endeavours to use black women’s incapacity to comply with race/gender categories to demonstrate the inadequacy of the categories themselves, her argument shores up the conception that black women’s identities are constituted exclusively by race and gender. That is, Crenshaw focuses on black women because they are ‘multiply burdened,’ yet her analysis precludes an examination of forms of ‘multiple burdens’ (or the intersections of privileges and burdens) beyond race and gender. With little attention to the role that sexuality, nationality, or class, for example, might play in mediating or entrenching black women’s experiences of ‘burdens,’ black women function exclusively as sites that demonstrate the importance of race-and-gender, rendering black women’s experiences the aggregate of race and gender.”
- 12 Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X—the Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought*, First edition, American Philosophy (Fordham University Press, 2014), 37.
- 13 John McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 98.
- 14 I draw here on Riki Anne Wilchins, *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender* (Magnus Books, 2013), 124, 127.
- 15 Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Seal Press, 2008), xi.
- 16 lila lavender, “Fragments: Revolutionary Philosophy, Sex-Gender Regimes, Guerrilla Genitals, and Our Monstrosity,” Medium, May 30, 2019, https://medium.com/@chriscoles_66854/fragments-revolutionary-philosophy-sex-gender-regimes-guerrilla-genitals-and-our-monstrosity-3f037b6afc9d.

PART VI

Disability and intersectional embodiment



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DISCRIT RECOVERY

Correcting disability erasure for Black girls in the school–prison nexus

Subini A. Annamma, Beth A. Ferri, and Sylvia N. Nyegenye

In recent years, scholars have brought increased attention to the ways in which Black girls are “overpoliced and under protected” in schools (Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda 2015; Morris 2013; Onyeka–Crawford, Patrick, and Chaudhry 2017). Black girls are approximately four times more likely to receive out of school suspensions and expulsions, three and a half times more likely to be arrested at school, and five times more likely to be transferred to alternative schools when compared to white girls (Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality 2020). Disciplinary disparities between Black girls and white girls are even larger than those between Black and white boys.¹ Although the criminalization of Black girls in schools has gained necessary attention (Annamma 2017; Caldera 2018; Hines and Wilmot 2018; Wun 2016; Aguilera 2021; Harriet Tubman Collective 2016; and Majit 2011), the experiences of Black disabled girls² is too often missing or obscured within these data.

The lived experiences of Black disabled girls reveal that schooling is often a source of danger rather than care or support. In 2019, for instance, Malayla,³ an 11-year-old Black girl, was assaulted by a white male teacher for spraying air freshener after being asked to stop (Chappell and Díaz de León 2019). That same year, Kaia, a six-year-old Black girl, was arrested and sent to a juvenile detention center for throwing a tantrum (Zizaza 2019). In 2020, Grace, a 15-year-old Black girl, was incarcerated for not completing homework and getting up late for online school during the first weeks of the pandemic (Cohen 2020). Deemed probation violations, Grace spent 78 days in a youth prison before being released. Drawing on Disability Critical Race Theory or DisCrit (Annamma, Ferri, and Connor 2013), we recognize these incidents as fueled by ableism⁴ and misogynoir,⁵ situating all three girls as outside the boundaries of normal, therefore not worthy of protection.

Grace and Kaia’s experiences spurred social media campaigns and public outrage, shining a spotlight on each girl’s story and demanding the end of criminalization of Black girls. Lost in the details, however, was Kaia’s diagnosis of sleep apnea, which often causes behavioral outbursts in young children. Grace, too, was labeled with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), yet the connection between her disability (which impacts organization and time management) and what she was incarcerated for (missing homework and getting up late for virtual school) was absent. In each case, disability-related symptoms were *punished* by school officials, rather than *supported*. Yet, disability was subsequently erased in public calls for decriminalization.

Malayla's case, conversely, did not provoke the same kind of activism on social media even though she was violently assaulted by a white teacher. Media reports did mention that Malayla was labeled with an emotional disability and struggled with impulsivity. Did her social positioning as a disabled Black girl render her mistreatment less recognizable as an injustice? Did her disability label make it easier to justify or excuse her mistreatment?

Cognizant of the twin responses of criminalization and subsequent erasure of the intersectional nature of misogynoir and ableism, we argue for the need to make visible the roles that disability, ableism, and special education play in the criminalization of Black disabled girls. Chris Bell (2011), a Black disabled scholar, discussed the need to counter the erasure of Blackness and disability as one of *recovery*, to deconstruct systems that relegate bodies into separate spheres and *detection* to unearth "missed opportunities to think about how ... [multi-situated] bodies transform systems and culture" (4). Thus, the work of countering erasure of Black disabled girls involves both recovery and detection.

As an example, many well-known historical Black figures are not recognized as disabled even though they each named aspects of oppression we now recognize as ableism. Harriet Tubman's "sleeping spells" (Larson 2004) and Fannie Lou Hamer's polio were either the result of, or exacerbated by, misogynoir-related violence (Blain 2021). Hamer was also forcibly sterilized, like many Black women during Jim Crow. Recovery work enables us to trace the impact that disability and ableism had in their lives. Detection work also helps us to understand how experiences with disability and ableism shifted their worlds and work. Tubman credited her sleeping spells for giving her visions that spurred her to escape enslavement and to lead others to freedom. Hamer brought attention to forced sterilizations of poor Black women, a human rights violation so common that Hamer coined the practice the "Mississippi Appendectomy." Thus, recovery and detection are not simply about naming historical figures as disabled, but also accounting for the roles disability and ableism played in their oppression and subsequent resistance.

Fully accounting for the collusive effects of misogynoir and ableism is important not only in terms of historical figures, but also in highlighting contemporary experiences of Black disabled girls caught within the school-prison nexus. In this chapter, we examine ways that misogynoir and ableism contribute to the criminalization of Black disabled girls by connecting to tenets of Disability Critical Race Theory or DisCrit (Annamma et al. 2013). Next, we draw on Beal (2008) as an anchor, to trace how the collusive workings of misogynoir and ableism are used to criminalize Black disabled girls, by employing her lenses of economic exploitation, bedroom politics, and relationship to whiteness. Finally, we argue for the need to engage in a DisCrit abolitionist imaginary to provide Black disabled girls liberatory education and a just society in the new world that Beal imagined.

30.1 Misogynoir and ableism in the lives of Black disabled girls

Crenshaw (1989, 1991) coined the term intersectionality to underscore the complex ways multiple oppressions compound one another. While Crenshaw's original work was specifically focused on the interplay of oppressions experienced by Black women, more recent scholarship has examined intersectional oppressions in the education experiences of Black girls (Evans-Winters 2005; Lindsey 2018; Morris 2007; Morris 2016; Nyachae and Ohito 2019; Tonnesen 2013; Watson 2020). Yet, as Miles (2019) noted, the confluence of ableism, white supremacy, and misogyny must be accounted for to recognize Black women with disabilities as a minoritized group. This is true for Black disabled girls, as well, where disability is an identity that is both hypervisible, yet also invisible (Erevelles 2014).

Leonardo and Broderick (2011) recognize both whiteness and ability as forms of property, ensuring that Black disabled girls' experiences of disability are qualitatively different than their white disabled peers. Whereas white disabled girls are perceived as having needs that call for care and resources, Black girls with disabilities are imagined as a threat, targeted for removal, and funneled into restrictive spaces, including special education classes, alternative schools, and prisons (Pressley, Annamma, and Thompson 2020). To address the unique confluences of misogynoir and sexism, Bailey and Mobley (2019) remind scholars that "disability, race, and gender are always already present and simply need to be attended to in our analysis" (35).

The interplay of misogynoir and ableism in schools results in Black disabled girls being constructed as deficient, difficult, and dangerous. Robbed of any perceived innocence of childhood, Black disabled girls experience adultification (Epstein, Blake, and González 2017) and are regarded as superhuman and out of control due to ableism (Annamma 2021). Intersecting forms of oppressions collude to make Black disabled girls targets of abuse in schools. In the following sections we draw on Beal's (2008) analytic lenses of economic exploitation, bedroom politics, and relationship to whiteness to further explicate the experiences of Black disabled girls in schools.

30.2 Economic exploitation of Black disabled girls

Historically, the US was able to create and produce wealth through the institutions of settler colonialism, slavery, and the rise of capitalism. Industries that employ Black and Brown women continue to be among the most exploitive and low wage occupations, which is why Beal (2008, 170) and many Black feminists before her, including Anna Julia Cooper (1988), saw the liberation of Black women as the key to the liberation of all oppressed groups. Recognizing the centrality of economic exploitation to race, Beal wrote, if white people "do not realize that they are in fact, fighting capitalism and racism, we do not have common bonds" (174).

The structures of capitalism create and oppress disabled bodies as well (Russell and Malhotra 2019). Because both whiteness and ability both function as forms of property (Leonardo and Broderick 2011), the economic exploitation of Black and disabled people is deeply interconnected. As Bailey and Mobley (2019) argue, Black bodies have been portrayed as "naturally" incapable of performing on par with white hegemonic norms, thereby justifying their exclusion, exploitation, and marginalization. Although the connections to racialized economic oppression are well established, it may be less clear how disability is reflected in this legacy. Recent research, however, has begun to draw connections between race and disability in the history of enslavement (Barclay 2014; Boster 2013) and the transhistorical links between plantation slavery, Jim Crow, and a range of carceral logics, connecting the school-to-prison nexus to the mass incarceration of Black men (Erevelles 2014).

We argue that schooling is a key contributor to economic exploitation of Black disabled people. Prisons, institutions, and special education all produce bodies to fill clinical caseloads, occupy seats in alternative schools, and fill beds in carceral settings. In each instance, individuals are produced and then reduced to commodities. Schools also produce an educational underclass through academic tracking, segregated placements, and carceral modes of punishment, funneling large numbers of Black disabled girls into low wage jobs or carceral settings. As casualties of capitalism, Black disabled girls become ready candidates for sterilization, segregation, and incarceration. Yet, by erasing the mutually constitutive roles of ableism and misogynoir in the surveillance, labeling, and punishment of Black disabled girls (Annamma 2017), we allow these forms of oppressions to flourish.

30.3 Bedroom politics

It may be difficult at first to imagine how Beal's bedroom politics, or the history of forced and coerced sterilizations of women of color, can be linked to the education experiences of Black disabled girls, but DisCrit helps us draw out this connection when it "considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens" (Annamma et al. 2013, 11). With a DisCrit lens, we uncover how school practices assume Black disabled girls as hypersexual and yet undesirable, limiting their access to safety and protection that schools are expected to provide and by denying their rights as full citizens of schools and classrooms.

Overall, Black girls report being surveilled closely by adults for dress code violations, and educator comments about Black girls' bodies being pervasive (Carter Andrews et al. 2019). Black girls are subjected to more direct harassment and assault by peers and educators in schools compared to white girls (Espelage et al. 2016). When Black girls fight back, they are often positioned as the aggressor (Tonnesen 2013). When Black girls report sexual harassment, educators use policy as an excuse not to help them (Wilmot, Migliarini, and Annamma 2021). Moreover, Black girls are more likely to be blamed for their victimization by adults (Rahimi and Liston 2011). Given these realities of adultification, Black girls are positioned as hypersexual and deserving of the harassment they receive (Epstein et al. 2017).

Disturbing incidents of sexual assaults of Black disabled girls have been reported, yet instead of providing supports the victims were punished or even blamed. One disabled Black girl was forced to perform oral sex on a group of male peers and was then blamed for her sexual abuse and suspended for engaging in sexual activity (Joyce 2018). Sexual assaults of disabled girls in schools have been documented across the country, yet it is often difficult to ascertain the race of the victim in these reports. Unless the parent or lawyer shares the race of the victim, it often gets erased, and the innocence of disability invoked.⁶ Single-axis positioning of disability harkens to Crenshaw's argument that multiple identities and oppressions are often erased when seeking legal remedies. Because Black girls are rarely afforded innocence, they are not provided the protections given to white disabled girls. Ultimately, Black disabled girls are often targeted for sexual harassment and assault because misogynoir positions them as hypersexual *and* are not protected because ableism associates their Blackness and disability with undesirability (Majiet 2011) or culpability.

The bedroom politics Beal (2008) critiqued are symptoms, she argues, of a society that fails to protect Black women. Connected to a failure to protect are school practices that surveil, label, and punish Black disabled girls as difficult and dangerous in order to subjugate Black girlhood (Erevelles and Nguyen 2016). Sadly, much of the violence shaping Black disabled girls' experiences in schools arise from racist, colonizing, and ableist practices that have become completely normalized in our ideas about schooling (Watts and Erevelles 2004, 293). Furthermore, the forms of sexual harassment and assault Black disabled girls experience at school deny their rights as citizens and harm their education.

30.4 Relationship to whiteness

Despite the ways that Black disabled girls' lives are shaped by the confluence of multiple forms of oppression, too often political organizing and theorizing fails to consider or fully account for the whole of their experiences. Drawing on an intellectual tradition of Black feminist theorizing that both preceded and followed her, Beal (2008) argued that Black feminist organizing could not afford to focus solely on gender oppression. She wrote, "Any white group that does not

have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the black women's struggle" (174). For Black disabled girls, the need to account for misogynoir as well as ableism (along with markers such as social class) is paramount yet, multiple erasures and exclusions continue to frustrate a fully intersectional accounting of their unique positionality and lived experience in schools.

The late Chris Bell (2006) provided one of the most incisive critiques of what he called "White disability studies" for failing to interrogate racism alongside ableism. He showed how the lack of intersectional analyses contributed to false universals, masking white norms that undergirded them and failed to consider how race/ethnicity (as well class) shapes the experience of disability. Similarly, Bailey and Mobley (2018) drew on the influential Black feminist text, *All the Women were White, All the Blacks were Men, But Some of Us Were Brave* (Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982) to uncover the ability norms that often haunt race- and gender-based analyses and norms of whiteness haunt disability analyses.

Written as a series of tenets, DisCrit (Annamma et al. 2013) builds on the legacy of Beal (2008) and others (Bailey and Mobley 2018; Bell 2006; Crenshaw 1989) to more fully account for the collusiveness of racism and ableism and to help to support strategic and intersectional solidarities across difference. The tenets of DisCrit are as follows:

- (1) DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.
- (2) DisCrit values multidimensional identities and troubles singular notions of identity such as race or dis/ability or class or gender or sexuality, and so on.
- (3) DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms.
- (4) DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.
- (5) DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens.
- (6) DisCrit recognizes whiteness and ability as property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens.
- (7) DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.

We can see in these tenets the ways in which misogynoir and ableism circulate interdependently to discipline and punish Black disabled girls. Applying tenet one, for instance, we can see how Malayla, Grace, and Kaia experienced the collusive effects of misogynoir and ableism that connect to longer histories of struggle (tenet five). Tenet six, which focuses on whiteness and ability as property, helps us to understand why their disabilities offered them little or no protection or support and were instead punished and criminalized. Tenet four reminds us to focus our analytic gaze on the stories of girls like Malayla, Grace, and Kaia, whose lived experiences illuminate intersectional workings of power. Finally, tenet seven helps us to surface all forms of resistance and support liberation and world making.

30.5 Imagining and creating a new world

Black disabled girls, like Malayla, Grace, and Kaia, are criminalized daily in schools. Black girls' disabilities, which should offer them accommodation and support, are often a source of pun-

ishment in school. Yet, the continuous erasure of disability in our social movements against the mistreatment of Black girls in schools, reinforces deficit constructions of disability as something to be ashamed of, erased, and criminalized. As the Harriet Tubman Collective (2016) argues, Black disabled girls share a cultural and political identity and a lineage of collective resistance. Consequently, our responses to disability must shift as we fight for Black disabled girls to have a liberatory education. As Beal (2008) argued, we must both commit to the deconstruction of the current systems of power and create “new institutions that will eliminate all forms of oppression for all people” (176). Changing systems, Beal argues, also means changing our day-to-day interactions. In line with Beal’s call, we turn toward abolition.

Abolition has gained popularity in recent years. Its increased usage, however, has led some to question if abolition risks losing its radical edge (Kaba 2021). As scholars, we have sought to assure that our commitments to abolition are not watered down in general abstractions but are focused on shifting daily practices and systems. Consequently, we use an abolitionist imaginary fueled by the tenets of DisCrit, to create a set of refusals that are necessary to begin to tear down interlocking systems and demands to build something new in its place (Annamma et al. 2021).

DisCrit abolitionist imaginaries for Black disabled girls:

- (1) Refuse pathologizing logics and practices wielded against Black disabled girls.
- (2) Demand we honor the multiplicative identities and name intersecting oppressions.

Ableism and misogynoir are often invisibilized in a variety of justice spaces that call for decriminalizing Black girls’ lives in schools. Disability erasure involving Black girls (like Grace and Kaia) implies that it is okay to engage pathologizing logics and practices of surveillance, labeling, and punishment that are used against Black disabled girls whose disabilities cannot be erased (like Malayla). When we recognize disability as a social, political, and cultural identity with a lineage of resistance to the material realities of ableism and misogynoir, we support the full humanity of all Black disabled girls.

- (3) Refuse reforms of carceral spaces.
- (4) Demand that we center Black disabled girls, their families, and communities when determining processes and goals for our work.

When we apply Beal’s frameworks to the experiences of Black disabled girls, we see the ways in which they are pushed into carceral education spaces (e.g., segregated special education classrooms, alternative schools, youth prisons), where compliance is prioritized over learning. When an injustice occurs, like the one Malayla experienced, often the solution offered is to reform the space (e.g., fire the teacher, ban certain restraints), but making small changes cannot dislodge the pathologizing logics imbued in education. Instead, we need to center Black disabled girls to determine how to tear down systems because they know best how those systems label, surveil, and punish them.

- (5) Refuse carceral geographies to enter youth homes, schools, and communities.
- (6) Demand that we make significant investment to rebuild educational systems and systems of support and care for youth.

Bringing labeling, surveillance, and punishment into the spaces where youth frequent as an alternative to incarceration is economic exploitation parading as more humane treatment (Schwerner and Law 2020). For example, the Baker Act has been used against Black disabled

girls in Florida to place children who act out in schools in psychiatric institutions (SPLC 2021). The same carceral geographies stretch into homes and schools and result in Black disabled girls experiencing serious trauma—from being handcuffed to being held without parental consent (Aguilera 2021). Abolition requires that we make significant investments to build systems of care and support involving responses to harm that are humane and effective.

- (7) Refuse to leave some behind.
- (8) Demand we highlight the ways Black disabled girls are already resisting criminalization and transform the ways we socially construct crime.

Attempts to normalize youth who are criminalized in schools often involve erasing aspects of their identities that are perceived as negative or outside normalcy. Enacting a form of “disrespectability politics” (Adams and Erevelles 2016), these erasures inadvertently serve to rationalize placing those who cannot (or will not) assimilate into norms of white, middle class, cis gender able-bodied/mindedness into carceral spaces. Because Malayla was in a special education classroom, not following the rules, and fought back when her teacher attacked her, she was seen as deserving of the physical assault and even positioned as the aggressor, despite being only 11 years old at the time (Annamma 2021). Tenet seven of DisCrit requires that we recognize Malayla as resisting the criminalization of her behaviors and body in a school system bent on punishing her. Her resistance, in all its difficult beauty, should be seen as a fierce belief that she had the right not to obey unjust rules or submit to physical abuse. If we valued the ways in which Black disabled girls resist their social positioning in schools, we would transform the way we socially construct deviance and crime. The goal is not to make Black disabled girls conform to exclusionary norms; it is to blow up those norms.

Black girls are often subjected to disability at higher rates and their experiences with the consequences of those disabilities are more severe when compared to white peers. We argue, however, that the ways Black disabled girls shift cultures is more innovative *because* of their unique experiences with intersecting oppressions. Ultimately, we imagine the new world Beal described as one that refuses the erasure of Blackness and disability and disallows ableism and misogynoir to thrive. Black disabled girls like Malayla, Grace, and Kaia deserve better than what they have been offered in schools. We can build something better through a DisCrit abolitionist imaginary by changing both daily practices and the systems that harm all of us and providing systems of care and support so Black disabled girls, and all Black girls, can thrive in schools and society.

Notes

- 1 CRDC reporting assumes binary sex/gender categories, therefore non-binary gender identity and sexual orientation are not reflected which is problematic and obscures the relationship between non-binary, gender queer, and trans* students’ experiences in these same exclusionary and restrictive disciplinary systems.
- 2 We utilize “Black disabled girls” instead of “Black girls with disabilities” purposely to heed the calls of many in the disabled community, as well as scholars who demand identity-first language, one in which disability is honored as part of a historical, political, and cultural identity with material realities instead of disability as something to be disconnected from the person. See Andrews et al. (2019) for academic and Brown (2011) for community call-ins to use identity-first language.
- 3 Pseudonyms are used for Grace and Malayla because their real names were never reported in the news.
- 4 T. L. Lewis (2021), along with Dustin Gibson, defined ableism as: “A system that places value on people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence and excellence. These constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence and excellence are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness,

eugenics and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable or worthy based on people's appearance and/or their ability to satisfactorily produce, excel & 'behave.' You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism."

- 5 Moya Bailey coined the term "misogynoir" in 2008 to account for the intersections of anti-Blackness and misogyny, particularly in terms of negative representations of Black women in visual and cultural spaces. See her new book, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* (2021).
- 6 See, for example, *Jane Doe v. Fulton County School District* (www.justice.gov/case-document/file/1292706/download)

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DISABILITY ART ON LOCKDOWN

Access and intersectionality in a pandemic

Robert McRuer

On May 12, 2020, *The Guardian* reported on the authoritarian populist president of Brazil's disdain for artists who had died of COVID-19 (Phillips and Briso 2020). Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer who has defended dictatorship and torture, has been dubbed the "Trump of the Tropics" and has become infamous for his extreme views and bigotry. A few of the pre-COVID highlights include his frequent assertions that he is proudly homophobic and that he would prefer for his son to die in a car accident than be gay. He told an elected official that he would not rape her because she was "not worthy of it," and he actively voted, while in the Chamber of Deputies, for former President Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in the name of those who tortured her during years of military dictatorship in Brazil (each year, he also actively celebrates the 1964 coup that brought the dictatorship to power). His first acts in office in January 2019 were to pull back land rights for Indigenous groups and for descendants of slaves in order to open the Amazon in particular for development ("Quilombolas" is the name for descendants of slaves in Brazil who have hitherto had particular protected sections of land) and to remove LGBT people from protections that would be afforded by the ministry of human rights. Violence against LGBT people and others in Brazil was already incredibly high, but rose dramatically during Bolsonaro's first year in office.

During the pandemic, Bolsonaro, who dismissed COVID-19 as a "little flu," contracted the virus and appeared to recover from it, although as of this writing more than 621,000 people in Brazil have died (the official number of deaths in January 2022 placed Brazil behind only the United States, although it has at times looked possible that Brazil would pass the US, eventually, in cases and deaths, and many poor and Indigenous deaths have gone uncounted in the country). When I say, however, that Bolsonaro "appeared to recover" it is actually probably too soft; one could say that with both his illness and former injuries sustained after he was stabbed during the general election, he actively constructed overcoming narratives that made *others* look weak in comparison. This is what overcoming narratives in general are wont to do; scholars in disability studies have long critiqued the ways in which overcoming narratives exceptionalize a supposedly inspiring individual with an impairment or disability in ways that do little or nothing to benefit the vast majority of disabled people, and in fact make them look like they are not trying hard enough. It is thus not surprising that Bolsonaro did nothing to recognize the Brazilian artists who died due to complications from COVID-19, including well-known musicians, actors, and writers. One of the writers who died early in the pandemic was Rubem Fonseca; Fonseca's

daughter Bia Corrêa do Lago, also a writer, said Bolsonaro's indifference to the death of artists was not surprising, given that when asked about his favorite *authors*, Bolsonaro cited only a dictatorship-era *torturer*, Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra (Phillips and Briso 2020).

It's important to situate Bolsonaro's disdain for the death of artists due to COVID as only the logical conclusion of increasingly institutionalized disdain for living artists, who were already reeling from an anti-arts, anti-education, anti-humanities climate, even before Bolsonaro took office in January 2019 (I would in fact argue that Bolsonaro's embrace of torture as an alternative to art makes explicit something that was hitherto simply implicit, perhaps even beyond the borders of Brazil). Although Bolsonaro's predecessor Michel Temer, following protests, restored the ministry of culture that he had cut upon assuming office, Bolsonaro in 2019 simply cut the ministry of culture again and, despite pre-COVID protests by artists and students, accelerated cuts to education and the arts. Austerity measures like these, particularly entrenched in Brazil but operative globally, are always in the background of this chapter.

Of course, living artists, and not just in Brazil, did not fare well on lockdown and beyond, as the COVID-19 crisis continued. *The New York Times* reported that although arts venues were often among the first to close during the crisis, they were in most locations among the last to reopen (if they reopened at all) (Cohen 2020). In the United States, by September 2020, the overall unemployment rate was 8.5 percent. The National Endowment for the Arts, however, reported that 52 percent of actors, 55 percent of dancers, and 27 percent of musicians were unemployed. The unemployment rate for many other hard-hit groups (waiters, cooks, retail workers), did not come close to these numbers (27 percent, 19 percent, and 13 percent, respectively) (Cohen 2020). And of course those figures reveal nothing about how the crisis has been even more pronounced for *disabled* actors, dancers, musicians, and other artists.

Disabled people in general did not fare well, in many ways, during the COVID-19 emergency. Swedish queer crip artist Christine Bylund writes about government strategies to "center and 'protect' disabled people" and notes that these strategies have led to the experience during the crisis of "being put aside and sacrificed for the convenience of the able-bodied majority" (Bylund 2022). On one side, Bylund is being sharply critical of a paternalistic, "do no harm" attitude that is particularly patronizing to disabled people in Sweden. Don Kulick and Jens Rydström sum up this attitude using two Swedish mottoes: "Don't wake the sleeping bear" and "If I haven't done anything, at least I haven't done anything wrong" (23). With such attitudes, the idea that someone might get hurt precludes a more textured consideration of what disabled freedom and inclusion should look like. From another angle, Bylund is also teasing out something that has arguably been shared across borders during lockdown and beyond, as disabled people in many locations have recounted and shared across borders stories of isolation, neglect, and contempt from policymakers, care workers, and others. Even before the pandemic, Bylund's artistic practice has in fact long entailed sharing queer/crip ideas across time and space, as she has affirmed crip connections with artists such as Frida Kahlo and Keith Haring (and I will say more about this in my conclusion).

I use Bylund to pivot to my larger project on access and intersectionality in a pandemic, bringing in, as I proceed, more disabled artists "on lockdown." Disability art through the pandemic has been generated in many amazing ways, and this chapter will ultimately be able to enumerate only a few such artists, centering primarily on a visually impaired dancer, queer, and Costa Rican immigrant to NYC, Christopher "Unpezverde" Núñez (the artistic name translates as "a green fish"; Núñez at times incorporates images of green fish into his performances). The concept of *disability justice*, arguably the most intersectional concept to ever emerge from the disability movement, is the foundation for my analysis. Disability justice is a concept developed by artists and activists who are disabled and queer, Black, Indigenous, people of color. The thinkers

and artists involved in the movement include Patty Berne (whose name is associated with the initial draft of the principles of disability justice), Leroy Moore, and others, many of whom have been members of the dance troupe Sins Invalid. Disability justice insists on an intersectional approach that resists the mandates of neoliberal capitalism and that imagines queer/crip people of color as leaders and authors of both the disability movement and disability culture. Berne herself in fact positions intersectionality as the absolute first principle of disability justice:

INTERSECTIONALITY. We know that each person has multiple identities, and that each identity can be a site of privilege or oppression. The mechanical workings of oppression and how they output shift depending upon the characteristics of any given institutional or interpersonal interaction; the very understanding of disability experience itself is being shaped by race, gender, class, gender expression, historical moment, relationship to colonization, and more.

(Berne, *qtd. in Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 26*)

Other principles of disability justice, according to Berne and the movement, include an anti-capitalist politic, cross-movement solidarity, sustainability, and commitment to cross-disability solidarity (Berne, *qtd. in Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 26*).

I'll use an event by DanceNYC to move into a thicker project in this chapter on disability justice, access, and intersectionality in the pandemic. On June 16, 2020, DanceNYC, as part of their Artists Are Necessary Workers series, hosted the virtual event "Disability Justice as the Vanguard of Recovery Thinking." Participants included Núñez; Dustin Gibson, a Pittsburgh and St. Louis-based artist and activist working at the intersections of disability, race, class; Alice Sheppard, a wheelchair user who is arguably one of the most important dancers and choreographers in the United States; and Simi Linton, author of *My Body Politic* and producer of the disability documentary *Invitation to Dance*. The session surveyed many issues but made clear that disabled artists were in fact generating community, ideas, and work during the pandemic; over the course of the session, there was a lot of debate about how disability art might represent a vanguard of sorts, although there was debate about that word ("vanguard"), and also debate over the word "recovery," as opposed to rejuvenation, reinvention, or multiple other possibilities. Virtual collaborations like the DanceNYC event are behind my title "Disability Art on Lockdown," even as the title also arguably has a double valence, as my introduction suggests, as the title simultaneously gestures to the ways in which disability and art have been, increasingly, on lockdown (facing, as I suggested with my introduction on Brazil, massive cuts from governments and a sedimented logic of austerity everywhere), even before the COVID-19 crisis. My points in this chapter will be fairly straightforward and at times even simple, although a case can at times be made that simplicity (if it is intended to further access) can be a crip/queer value. I suggest in what follows that disability art on lockdown augments or should augment several crip/queer modalities; I'll list and then analyze five. First, disability art on lockdown puts forward a crip/queer sense of *process* over product. Second, it is shaped in *crip collectivity* that is grounded in disability justice. Third, it performs or actualizes what have come to be called, following Merri Lisa Johnson's coinage of the term, *cripistemologies*, disabled ways of knowing (Johnson and McRuer 2014, 127). Fourth, disability art on lockdown necessitates and thickens what Emma Sheppard has termed "crip pacing" (even if that is arguably a concept that has been collectively generated) (Sheppard 2020, 14). Finally, disability art on lockdown forges what various scholars, activists, and artists, such as Eliza Chandler, have imagined as accessible *crip world-making*, which has gone by many names, including what Aimi Hamraie terms "alterlivability" (Chandler 2018, 461; Hamraie 2020, 407).

All of these modalities are deeply intersectional. The second decade of the 21st century arguably offers us what we might understand, adapting Roderick A. Ferguson, as one-dimensional disability. Ferguson (2019) writes, in *One-Dimensional Queer*, of the ways in which a multivalent, multiracial, anti-capitalist, and antiwar queer movement following the Stonewall uprising became, as the 20th century concluded, a one-dimensional movement focused on assimilation and (homo)normativity for a very narrow group of white gay people who pursued aims (such as a single-minded focus on marriage rights) that would privatize and domesticate queer life. The 21st century, similarly, has spotlighted a range of disabled figures, sometimes with a great deal of power, such as Texas Governor Greg Abbott or North Carolina Representative Madison Cawthorn. These figures are out and visible as disabled but have no sense of affinity with other marginalized groups and often they activate policies that are arguably actively detrimental to the vast majority of disabled people. Abbott, for example, during the first two years of the pandemic, was unrelenting in his opposition to mask mandates that would keep vulnerable populations (including many disabled people) safe. He has also pursued restrictions on a range of accommodations that make it easier for disabled people to vote and, for this reason, has been sued by disabled organizations for violating the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In and through such a one-dimensional materialization of disability, to adapt directly Ferguson's analysis (by positioning *disabled* where he locates *queer*), "the meaning of freedom for [disabled] folks and minorities, in general, shifted radically" (2019, 3).

I have elsewhere called the first few decades of the 21st century "crip times" (McRuer 2018, 29). In that analysis, I argued that disability is a central, but undertheorized, component of a global austerity politics. From fairly early in the pandemic, in multiple locations, various outlets regularly announced that austerity was over. I would argue, however, that the crisis showed nothing if not how deeply entrenched austerity was as a global logic. Millions of people in the US over the course of 2020–2021 lost health care because of the crisis, while disabled children and seniors did online fundraisers raising more than £33 million for the National Health Service in the United Kingdom because of how the NHS has been open to business models (Nova 2020; Shearing 2021). Similar examples could be offered in numerous other locations. There was some sense that authoritarian populists like Bolsonaro and former US President Donald Trump were more and more *rejecting* austerity (represented by Trump's supposedly anti-Republican call for a \$2000 stimulus check, or Bolsonaro's "ajuda," providing for a time checks for poor Brazilians and subsequently, temporarily at least, boosting Bolsonaro's popularity); my own sense is that this was generally a smokescreen for *ongoing* austerity, for neoliberalism continued in an authoritarian vein that threw a few crumbs to many while continuing to redistribute wealth upward and to militarize protection of that upward redistribution of wealth.

"Crip times," however, is a multivalent phrase, pointing toward these hard, bleak times, toward precarity, and suffering but also toward the vibrant cultural production, and intersectional activist and artistic resistance that has emerged, across borders, out of, or in excess of, a logic of austerity, and toward generative, collective forms of disabled thought (McRuer 2018, 29). In the remainder of this chapter, to spotlight that generative work, I will first give a reading of Núñez's pre-pandemic work followed by his reinvention of that work on lockdown. I'll survey his and others' theorizing during the pandemic to illustrate crip process, collectivity, cripistemologies, and crip pacing. I'll end with gestures toward Bylund and a few other crip and queer artists and collectives on lockdown to think about alterlivability and accessible crip world-making.

Núñez's process as an artist entailed literally crossing borders and arriving in New York and discovering disability community. I had actually seen some of his work in 2010 in Costa Rica and knew that he was disabled, but he stresses that even if he was known to be visually impaired,

he did not find artistic community in Costa Rica and was partially motivated to leave the country and region because of ableism. In and through contact with the disability arts community in New York City, Núñez came into his own as disabled—an example, perhaps, of what I argued in *Crip Theory* that it takes at least two people to make a crip, or a disabled person (McRuer 2006, 134). As a queer man, he had experienced violence, including disabling violence, in his past and saw his immigration to New York as a way of coming home to multiple facets of himself; indeed, in an extensive video interview made for Immigrant Heritage Week 2020 in New York City he explains “this *is* home,” after a lawyer informed him that his request for asylum had been denied and that it might be time to think about going home (by which the lawyer meant Costa Rica) (NYC Mayor’s Office). The incident recalls for me an ironic anecdote from queer, disabled, Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, who writes of meeting with lesbian students to discuss their fears: “One of the students said,” Anzaldúa recounts, “I thought homophobia meant fear of going home.” Anzaldúa continues, deploying language that might be read through a disability lens, “And I thought, how apt. Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We’re afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la Raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged” (1998, 20). In many ways like Núñez, Anzaldúa famously, essentially, *creates* home, by turning a borderlands existence that is initially figured as wounded, broken, bleak, and defeated, into something else or something more multivalent, another way of being-in-common with others and revaluing what she calls the “squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead: in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (1998, 3). For Núñez, even more than Anzaldúa (who never fully embraced the label “disability” despite living with diabetes for most of her adulthood), the process of coming home commences with the discovery and ongoing invention of disabled community, and queer community, and very specifically in New York, an intersectional community of disabled people of color.

“Yo, obsolete” was Núñez’s last performance in public before lockdown, on the first Saturday in March of 2020. Over the course of the pandemic, Núñez continued to work on “Yo, obsolete,” shaping into what would become part of a filmic triptych. One can read into the very title of “Yo, obsolete” a newly-constructed and border-crossing identity, with the mix of the Spanish Yo/I and the English word obsolete (which would be *obsoleto* or *obsoleta* in Spanish, but then “Yo!” is also an English interjection). Núñez wears a pink hoody for the performance, painted with pop art (including Andy Warhol’s bananas), and red long-johns, similar to underwear that had been worn by his violent Mormon father (a style of underwear that has become, Núñez notes, something of a sexual fetish object in the queer community). Núñez’s performances have increasingly become (and here is my first crip modality, process over product) *access experiments*, positioning access as community and *collective* labor, but also as what the disability justice movement understands as collective joy and love. Both the live performance and the filmic triptych shaped on lockdown are access experiments for Núñez, as he works constantly to extend the ways in which the performance might be apprehended in a variety of sensory modes. “Yo, obsolete” opens with the establishment of a tactile (but ever-shifting) border to the performance space, but also includes voice-over narration as the performance continues. Núñez often enlists the audience for the act of visual description for others, which can of course be unpredictable, but of also generatively varied. “Yo, obsolete” entails playing, while in pink, with a broken toy truck; at one point, Núñez holds the toy truck by strings and spins, saying aloud, “Stop, Daddy! Daddy, stop! Daddy!” The pleas draw attention to the threat of violence, familial and otherwise, against queer and trans children, against (to return to Anzaldúa) those who go beyond the confines of the “normal,” as does the pink hoody. Núñez explains,

It's about the way that we see some colors are for boys and some colors are for girls and some toys are for boys and some toys are for girls ... I didn't care if I was a boy or didn't care if I was a girl. I just wanted to be myself.

(*Nguyen 2020*)

Another piece performed in 2019 at The Kitchen in New York City, and that over the pandemic became the second part of the filmic triptych, was titled "A Garden in the Shape of Dreams" and gestured even more toward an imagined, if not yet realized, disability collectivity. "A Garden in the Shape of Dreams" is a multi-performer piece, presented as a series of vignettes aimed both at evoking queer and disabled childhood memories and gesturing toward a future elsewhere and elsewhere. Núñez uses a green cloth to stage movement that connects the dancers. Núñez himself appears in the performance, "growing sideways" as Kathryn Bond Stockton might put it in *The Queer Child* (2009, 1), as a sort of queer and crip Peter Pan, embracing the other performers/children, two of whom melt into his embrace while another curls up in a fetal position on the stage before him. Núñez intends for the piece to consider the isolation in the lives of children with disabilities and to gesture, simultaneously, toward creative play as a response to trauma and isolation. He notes that the performance allows for the "persistent evocation of an imagined place inhabited by imagined people or beings."

During the pandemic, Núñez has held various positions, including artist-in-residence at the Center for Performance Research and, by late 2021, a new appointment as Artist in Residence at The Joyce Theater, which allowed for conceptualization of "A Fuzzy Yellow Spot," the final piece of the filmic triptych, which would ultimately come together beneath the title "Memories of a Disabled Childhood: The Real, The Imaginary and the Misunderstood." I spoke to him about his work during lockdown, including a collaboration for *Performance Journal*. The first two intersectional modalities—process and collectivity—have been prominent in my overview of Núñez's performances; it's in his reflections directly on disability art on lockdown that these modalities come together with cripistemologies. Núñez spotlighted for me that the pandemic materialized a period of history where nondisabled people were learning what most didn't have any clue about before, including what a particular kind of isolation feels like (and nondisabled people, especially in the United States, were actually very bad at learning these lessons). As my discussion of his 2019 performance suggests, however, *disabled* artists were already turning isolation into gardens in the shape of dreams. For Núñez, the sharing of "cross-disability knowledge" comes from a crip will to imagine and create, always, something beyond isolation. When discussing disability art on lockdown, however, Núñez arguably activates a cripistemological (and queer) will to *bite the hand that feeds*, in order to feed *more* people, in the process looking *backward* to where we have been and *forward* to where we might go. His practice, for me, conjures up a quintessential moment in a longer history of crip/queer "biting of the hand that feeds." In 1988, the art collective for ACT UP, Gran Fury, as they began to receive recognition directly from the art world, put out a simple image in white block letters, "With 42,000 Dead/Art Is Not Enough/Take Collective Action to End the AIDS Crisis" (Crimp and Rolston 1990, 21). ACT UP was, put differently, literally generating art saying the collective "we" that we must imagine needs more than art. Or at least we need more than the domesticated forms of art often visible through museums, exhibitions, grants.

For Núñez, biting the hand that feeds has meant resisting, in the collective interests of queers and disabled people of color, in particular, the focus on product. Generally, funding for dancers comes with the expectation that the final result is a performance product (and he himself received his current assignments with that expectation). On lockdown, however, Núñez decided quite quickly that he didn't care so much about a product and that he was more interested in

collecting and curating stories and experiences of those queer and disabled people who *don't* usually get funded. He repeatedly turned, moreover, toward the concept of disability justice to convey the evolution of his thinking.

Núñez's contribution to disability justice while on residency and working for *Performance Journal* was to look *backward and forward*. Backward, he reflected on various crip temporalities that are actively invisibilized: "I was working 20 hours a day just to pay the rent when I was undocumented," he told me. Many others were doing the same, without books, without films, without workshops, without grants. "That knowledge and motion has value," Núñez insisted, but that knowledge is often completely erased, even in disability community. Arguably, as Núñez looks back to a 20-hour-a-day workday, more expansive and multivalent notions of "crip time" are needed. Crip time has been theorized most (almost exclusively, in fact) in relation to slowness: something will happen later, on a completely different timeline, one might not be able to be in a certain place, because of illness or fatigue (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018; Samuels 2017). Without discounting that important work in any way (like other disabled people, Núñez also values slowness), the cripistemological insight here *also* links crip time, especially for many disabled people of color and immigrants in a service economy, to the compulsory speed of capitalism and to (a different type of) exhaustion: he and many others worked those 20-hour days for survival, sometimes actively compounding disabilities while living lives not always legible to others as "disabled." Reflecting back on that experience, Núñez found himself wanting to value the disability knowledge that came from that survival. And for him this entailed a very concrete commitment to *changing the process of funding*, moving away from an emphasis on product to a focus on emotional experiences and experiential knowledges (slow *and* fast) that he feels have been, in his words, "dismissed by white supremacy," including the white supremacy that an intersectional movement for disability justice has traced within the disability movement. There is a certain austerity logic built into the process of acquiring funding for art that invariably favors white people—only the few will receive the funding, the few who have the time, space, slowness to pursue individual grants, proposals, workshops, and so forth. Gathering other stories, for Núñez, entails, looking *forward* now, *thinking beyond such an austere logic*.

Núñez's play with and within a range of motions, and his valuing of an expansive understanding of disabled temporalities suggests for me another crip mode, crip pacing, that has been legible in his work and others' on lockdown. Architects of a disability justice movement such as Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) have theorized access as a form of "collective joy and offering we can give to each other" (2). I've already noted that Núñez's performances are often access experiments; they actively recruit participants for such collective joy. Emma Sheppard (2020) is one writer who has explicitly named the attention to varied temporalities and motions "crip pacing" (14). It is a good descriptor of Núñez's work on lockdown because, as Sheppard describes it, crip pacing is not about the capitalist compulsion to optimize production, but is rather a form of "politicized self-care" designed to "optimize joy" (15). Sheppard's own theorization of crip pacing is also delightfully queer, as her work entails considering how disabled people in pain might navigate BDSM collectively to maximize pleasure and joy (and BDSM, we might note, actively mixes, but quite consciously, sometimes fast, sometimes slow temporalities). For Núñez, the resistance of an able-bodied pacing that would mandate a quick motion from grant application, to performance development, to final product is crip pacing in its will to generate collective joy, to encompass more experiences and stories into what we understand as disability art.

Crip pacing leads to a final modality, crip world-making, and I'll note a few artists beyond Núñez to illustrate this modality by way of conclusion. Queer world-making was first theorized by Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant and has since been widely used to describe queer prac-

tices that are “creative, performative, intimate, public, disruptive, utopian, and more” (I draw this from the description of their project used by the editors to invite contributions to the journal *QED: A Journal of LGBTQ Worldmaking*). *Crip* world-making is arguably more concrete, since it often focuses on the literal reshaping of spaces with an aim toward imagining more bodies, minds, and behaviors in those spaces. Aimi Hamraie’s (2020) concept of “alterlivability” helps to concretize crip world-making. Alterlivability is, Hamraie, writes, citing Anna Tsing, “a ‘material-discursive’ phenomenon” that “conjures visions of livability in spite of ... ‘capitalist ruins’” and encourages expanding “notions of lives worth living,” pushing us “to theorize how livable worlds materialize”—through design for Hamraie, through imaginative queer/crip performance for me in this chapter (407). I’m adapting the concept of alterlivability to crip times, to pandemic times, and to disability and disability art on lockdown.

By way of a brief conclusion, I’ll cite just a few more examples of what might be theorized as alterlivability materialized through disability art on lockdown. The members of Sins Invalid themselves continued to generate critical work, but adapted to the moment of COVID-19 and, over the course of 2020, to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Leroy Moore of Sins Invalid, in particular, consistently draws attention to how police violence often targets *disabled* people of color—indeed, “I can’t breathe” as a statement often attests to that (Mollow 2017, 105). During lockdown, Sins Invalid sustained its focus on an intersectional disability justice, but adapted to new circumstances. As some naively focused on how the earth was supposedly “breathing” because of lockdown, Sins Invalid insisted not only that a climate crisis was ongoing and accelerating, but was directly a crip issue with their October 2020 performance of “We Love Like Barnacles: Crip Lives in Climate Chaos.” By early 2021, their focus on care work and collective joy pushed them to put out workshops like “Surviving Burnout from Racism and Ableism in the Pandemic.”

In Mexico City, Teatro Ciego is a blind dance troupe that went online during the COVID-19 crisis, taking their material experience of different sensory perceptions and dance to a new medium and also offering not just dance but comedy during a time of coronavirus. One of their main performances has been “Los ciegos tbn lloran” (“blind people also cry”). The show is a comedy that addresses quotidian microaggressions and absurdities faced by blind people in a world constructed around the sighted. “Los ciegos tbn lloran” begins with commentary about ridiculous questions directed at blind people, like “how do you know if you are inside or outside?” The online performance ultimately aimed to disorient the perception of sighted people, whose own knowingness about “where they are” was decidedly thrown into relief by the pandemic.

As I mentioned, in the lockdown work she has been generating, Bylund reaches for connections across time and space; *Collateral Sounds*, in particular, traces a connection with Keith Haring, who died of complications from HIV/AIDS almost 30 years to the month from the global lockdown. Adapting Haring to our own moment, Bylund uses his words for our moment:

This, I feel, is the advantage to creating art at this point in time:/When we realize that we are temporary,/we are facing our self-destruction,/we are realizing our fate and we must confront it./Art is the only sensible primal response/to an outlook of possible destruction (obliteration).

Bylund herself positions disability art at the current moment as “an attempt to uncover and resist such mechanisms of obliteration” (Bylund 2022).

Which brings me back to one more artist in Brazil, since I opened with Bolsonaro’s obliteration of art during the crisis, literally (again) imagining torture as an alternative to art. Estela

Lapponi, a São Paulo-based artist, has put forward online encounters between her body and a guitar, such as in the 2020 performance *SelfishCamera: Born to Be On Live*. The performance here is borne out of an artist's perception of the need to reinvent her artistic work, she writes me, "on COVID-19's time." Her gaze as a dancer and performer has turned quite a lot to how we experience ourselves and others within the frame of the screen, to the perspectives in space, and to the disconcerting, dizzy, and often ableist movement of the selfie camera, due to the portability of the cell phone. Attempting to reflect on selfies capturing bodies otherwise, capturing the beauty of disabled bodies, Lapponi carried out some experiments at her home, which culminated in "SELFISHcamera," a tender and sexy collaboration with guitarist and musician Lirinha Morini. Like Núñez, Lapponi too offers provocative and necessary ways of navigating the world otherwise, but valuing disabled lives, art, and beauty in the process. In the Brazilian context, however, even as she reaches toward a form of alterlivability, she has found it difficult to place her work during lockdown, which (as I conclude) leaves that other valence of lockdown hanging in the air.

These are just a few examples of disability art on lockdown, with artists generating art that thinks in complex ways about the intersections of ability, immigration, gender, and sexuality, and sharing ideas across time and space. This gesture toward crip art on lockdown for me is (*à la* Núñez) very much not a final product but a process of encountering modes of resistance against mechanisms of obliteration. These are just a few examples of many more artists offering in a moment of emergency *other ways of perceiving and knowing*, collectivity, cripistemologies, crip pacing, and crip worldmaking. These are essential workers, deeply engaged in disability justice and in imagining and inventing the world that might come next.

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WHY IS “I CAN’T BREATHE” DISBELIEVED?

George Floyd, Barbara Dawson, and the intersecting roots of anti-Black violence

Anna Mollow

In this chapter, I discuss two instances in which police used deadly violence against Black disabled people. The first—the murder of George Floyd by officers Derek Chauvin, J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane, and Tou Thao—is well known. The second—the wrongful death of Barbara Dawson at the hands of police and medical staff at the Liberty Calhoun Hospital in Blountstown, Florida—is not well known but should be. As we shall see, these two killings share striking similarities. Both Dawson and Floyd were disabled: Dawson had respiratory disabilities, hearing loss, and a workplace injury; and Floyd had claustrophobia, chronic pain in his neck and back, and addiction to medications that he had been prescribed to manage his pain. Floyd and Dawson were also both large, and in both of their deaths their size was used by doctors and/or police officers as a justification for violence and the withholding of medical care. Both died when police attempted to force them into a police car, disregarding their desperate pleas for help and their cries that they could not breathe.

As I analyze these tragic killings—killings that form part of a broader pattern of anti-Black institutional violence, endemic in the United States—I build on my earlier essay, “Unvictimized: Toward a Fat Black Disability Studies,” in which I discuss the death of Dawson as well as police killings of Eric Garner, Terrell Day, Freddie Gray, and Tamir Rice (Mollow 2017). I also draw on the work of Black feminist theorists of intersectionality, seeking to show that, as the Combahee River Collective put it in 1977, “the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (in Hull et al. 1982, 13). The systems of oppression that I focus on in this chapter are white supremacy and ableism, and as I do so I argue that the two systems are inseparable. The interconnectedness of racist and ableist systems of oppression has long been the focus of conversations among scholars and activists working at the intersections of race and disability.¹ But outside of these important conversations, disability is often overlooked in the context of police violence against Black people. For example, while the surge of support for the Black Lives Matter movement in the months after Floyd’s death rightly drew attention to the pervasiveness of anti-Black violence, Floyd’s position as a person who was both Black and disabled received far less attention.

Moreover, the death of Barbara Dawson at the hands of police and medical professionals has virtually been ignored. This is in part due to sexism. The #SayHerName movement—which

has done crucial work in uplifting the stories of Dawson and other Black women killed by the police—has persuasively argued that we must think beyond the paradigm of a Black man killed by the police as the central, definitive example of what anti-Black institutional violence looks like; we must also attend to the stories of Black women. In addition, it is imperative to analyze the ways in which institutions other than the police perpetrate anti-Black violence. Once such institution is the medical profession, which has historically legitimized both anti-Black and ableist violence. Indeed, biological racism—which envisions Black people as innately disabled *and* claims that disabled people are inferior to nondisabled people—has its roots in theories expounded by doctors and medical authorities.

As we shall see, a blurring of the lines between police and medical authority occurred during the killings of both Floyd and Dawson. The police officers who killed Floyd continually made medical assessments of his condition and used these assessments to justify their violent actions. And at the Florida hospital where Dawson died, police and medical authorities worked in tandem to disparage her and to dismiss her reports of acute bodily suffering. The importance of these observations is more than merely theoretical. Understanding the role that the medical profession has historically played—and continues to play today—in legitimizing violence against Black people will require us to rethink a strand of argument, prevalent in some antiracist activism and theory, which suggests that directing funding toward healthcare providers and social workers, rather than to the police, will help prevent institutional violence against Black people from occurring (Budhu et al. 2020). While I wholly endorse the call to defund the police, I argue that dismantling racism, ableism, and other forms of prejudice within the medical profession is equally urgent if we are to understand—and change—the social structures and cultural prejudices that led to the deaths of Dawson, Floyd, and so many others.

Before I talk about Floyd’s and Dawson’s deaths, let me first say a bit about their lives. Dawson and Floyd each had rich lives and were loved and valued by their family members, friends, and communities. “Tell my kids I love them” were among Floyd’s last words, and he was the father of five children, including a daughter named Gianna who was six years old when he died. Floyd also left behind a girlfriend and four siblings who loved him dearly. Floyd’s loved ones have talked about his kindness and generosity, his athletic talent and love for movement, his enjoyment of good food, and his devotion to his family. Barbara Dawson, too, left behind a large family who loved her deeply; one of nine siblings, she was “Aunt Bobbie” to her many nieces and nephews and was also loved by her aunt and by her community. An active member of her local AME church and a founder of the Liberty County Youth Organization, Dawson called the many young people whom she mentored “my children” (Etters 2015; Murraine 2016). She loved to give gifts, including free treats from Barbara’s Snack Shop, which she owned (Murraine 2016).

I share briefly these pieces of Floyd’s and Dawson’s lives because I want to resist the way in which violence can strip away humanity—can make it easy, that is, to remember a person only as a symbol of victimhood, an object of violence. I invite those who are reading this chapter to continue to learn more about the lives—not just the deaths—of Dawson, Floyd, and others who were killed by police or medical authorities. And, in considering the circumstances surrounding each of their deaths, I invite us to notice, throughout each of their stories, how hard they fought to save their own lives, how deeply aware they each were that their Black Lives Matter. Part of this fighting, for Floyd and for Dawson, was a continued assertion, in the face of disbelief, that they were disabled. Floyd repeatedly informed the police officers who arrested him that, because he was claustrophobic and had anxiety, he was unable to follow their orders; Dawson pleaded for medical help, saying again and again, “I can’t breathe.” If we are to take Dawson’s and Floyd’s

own words seriously, we must account for the intersectional nature of anti-Black violence, with close attention to disability.

32.1 George Floyd

George Floyd was killed at a literal intersection outside the popular corner store Cup Foods, situated at the intersection of East 38th Street and Chicago Avenue; police officers Derek Chauvin, J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane, and Tou Thao murdered him on a Minneapolis street on May 25, 2020. As is well known, Chauvin forced Floyd to the pavement and pressed his knees against Floyd’s neck and back, ignoring his cries that he could not breathe. Kueng and Lane restrained Floyd’s torso and legs, holding him against the cement. And as a group of bystanders warned the officers that they were killing Floyd, Thao prevented these passers-by from intervening. Even when Floyd became unconscious and a pulse could no longer be found, Chauvin kept his knee on Floyd’s neck for two more minutes.

Floyd’s murder also took place at a metaphoric intersection: a location, that is, in which multiple axes of oppression converge. White supremacy is the most obvious of these systems. Despite claims on the part of some apologists for police violence that the murder of George Floyd was “not about race,” there is no escaping the reality that police officers have for centuries used violence, intimidation, and even torture to terrorize Black communities, all the while justifying this anti-Black violence with the lie that Black people’s supposed criminality is the problem (Muhammad 2010). It is this historical (and ongoing) context that explains why, in reaction to the trivial matter of Floyd’s possibly having used a counterfeit 20 dollar bill to buy cigarettes, the response was for two police officers (Lane and Kueng) to aggressively approach Floyd in the vehicle where he was dozing while sitting with a friend, to shout and point a gun at him, and to demand that he put his hands on his head. Disoriented and frightened (“Please don’t shoot me,” he said; “I’m scared, man”), Floyd wasn’t able to comply quickly enough to satisfy the officers, and they escalated the situation, angrily demanding that he get out of his vehicle and get into their police car, and calling for additional police officers (Chauvin and Thao) to come and assist them.²

The criminalization of Black people—that is, the spreading of the lie that Black people are innately predisposed to commit crimes—has long been used to legitimize white supremacy. And this history is inseparable from an interlocking history of ableist oppression. For example, during the heyday of eugenics, it was believed that “criminality” was an inherited trait, most common among people of color and disabled people. Ableism is an ideology based on the assumption that people can and should be sorted into categories of superior and inferior according to their mental and physical abilities; ableism also assumes that, once this sorting has taken place, it is appropriate to reward those who are positioned at the top of ability hierarchies and to punish those presumed to reside at the bottom (Baynton 2001). Thus, a whole range of widely circulated falsehoods about Black people—for example, the myths that, as compared to white people, Black people are less “intelligent,” are more prone to developing mental illnesses, and are more likely to experience addiction—need to be understood as inseparably racist and ableist (Bailey and Mobley 2019). The myths are racist because they are routinely invoked as evidence of Black people’s supposed inferiority—and they are ableist because they assume that disabled people are inferior to nondisabled people. After all, why should people (of any race) with intellectual disabilities, mental illnesses, and addiction be punished with poverty, imprisonment, social stigma, and police violence?

Doctors and other medical professionals, whose authority lent legitimacy to the “science” of eugenics, have been leading figures in the construction of an array of influential theories that

are both racist and ableist. These include 19th-century physicians' naming of "drapetomania" as a mental illness that supposedly caused Black people to want to escape from slavery (Baynton 2001, 38); 1960s psychiatrists' declarations that schizophrenia was a disability primarily affecting Black men, especially those involved in political protest (Metzl 2009); and some present-day doctors' and medical students' continued belief in debunked theories of scientific racism, such as the notion that Black people have fewer nerve endings, and feel less pain, than white people (Hoffman et al. 2016).

In light of this history, consider the uncanny overlapping of police and medical authority in the conversation that Chauvin and his fellow arresting officers had as they were killing Floyd. Bodycam footage reveals that during the nine minutes that Floyd lay on the ground under Chauvin's knee—saying "I can't breathe" more than 20 times—the officers who restrained him discussed among themselves their assessments of Floyd's medical state. For example, when Floyd was pinned to the ground and struggling to breathe, Lane remarked that he was worried about "excited delirium"—a pseudo-diagnosis that most medical professionals don't accept, in which a person using drugs is said to become agitated and violent and to suddenly become endowed with superhuman strength (Budhu et al. 2020). This diagnosis is disproportionately applied to Black people, and it is often used by law enforcement professionals as an "explanation" for why Black people died in custody (Budhu et al. 2020). In addition, during the many minutes in which Chauvin's knee was on Floyd's neck, and Floyd was repeatedly saying that he could not breathe, the officers gave what, in another context, might have sounded like medical advice. When Floyd cried out that they officers were killing him, Chauvin replied, "Then stop talking, stop yelling; it takes a heck of a lot of oxygen to talk." Similarly, Kueng insisted that Floyd wasn't in any medical danger. "You're fine," he told Floyd. "You're talking fine." Meanwhile, Thao told Floyd to "relax," while Lane advised him—incredibly—to take a "deep breath."

Who tells a person who says he can't breathe to relax and take a deep breath? One answer would be: a police officer with no medical training, who clearly has no business giving medical advice of any kind. Certainly, that is part of the answer, and these police officers' ineptitude as would-be healthcare providers—and their outright disregard for Black human life—played out in a number of quasi-medical decisions with fatal consequences. These decisions include the officers' choice not to summon emergency medical assistance until it was far too late; their discussion of whether Floyd was using drugs (and their implicit assumption that, if he was, this would make their violence appropriate); their refusal, for several minutes, to take his pulse (despite being urged to do so by many of the bystanders who had gathered around)—and of course, most egregiously, Chauvin's continuing to keep his knee on Floyd's neck, even for two minutes after Floyd had lost consciousness, and even after Keung finally did take Floyd's pulse and reported that he could not find one.

But another answer is that the medical profession itself—from whose authority the police who killed Floyd seemed to borrow—is complicit in the intersecting ideologies that legitimize anti-Black violence. As we have seen, doctors have historically helped to shape eugenic theories that portrayed Black people as biologically predisposed to committing crimes. Also relevant is the medical profession's role in the oppression of people with what I have in my previous work termed "undocumented disabilities" (Mollow 2014). I define undocumented disabilities as conditions that, in addition to being unapparent to casual observers, are also undetectable by present-day medical technology: a person feels sick or is suffering, but doctors can't find anything wrong (Mollow 2014). People with undocumented disabilities are often treated with suspicion and disbelief by healthcare providers, who assume that we must be imagining, exag-

gerating, or lying about our symptoms (Mollow 2014). These attitudes are instances of ableism, and they take on especially pernicious dimensions when they intersect with racist stereotypes about the alleged superhuman invulnerability of Black people.

Floyd had undocumented disabilities, including chronic pain, addiction, and claustrophobia. And when police officers Lane and Kueng attempted to arrest him, he tried to explain that the symptoms he was experiencing were making it impossible for him to do what they asked. When Floyd began to fall, Kueng yelled, “Stand up, stop falling down!” As the officers shouted at him and tried to force him into the backseat of a police car, Floyd explained, “I’m claustrophobic, and I got anxiety.” In this moment, Floyd was essentially asking for disability accommodations that might allow him to comply with the officers’ demands. He asked if he could sit in the front seat instead of the back, and he asked for more time: “Okay, okay, let me count to three and then I’m going in, please,” he said. Lane and Kueng angrily rejected Floyd’s requests. And when Chauvin and Thao arrived, the police further escalated their violence, Chauvin pinning Floyd to the ground and putting his knee on Floyd’s neck.

During the nine minutes that Chauvin was choking him, Floyd experienced severe physical symptoms that can also be understood under the rubric of undocumented disability. Floyd’s embodied experience told him clearly that he could not breathe, and he shared this experience unequivocally with the four officers who had his life in their hands. But the police insisted that Floyd’s distress could not be real; as long as he was able to talk, they kept telling him, he must be able to breathe. The officers were not medical professionals, but in disturbing ways they were acting much as medical professionals often do when patients complain of bodily suffering that doesn’t have an immediately obvious cause. Of course, it could be objected that Floyd’s difficulty breathing *did* have an obvious cause—Chauvin’s knee was on his neck. But from the vantage point of the police—who, as we shall see later in this chapter, were using logic not unlike that often used by healthcare providers—their observation that Floyd could talk meant that when Floyd said, “I can’t breathe,” he should not be believed.

As previously mentioned, another undocumented disability that Floyd had was opioid addiction, which he developed after being prescribed medication to treat chronic pain. During his arrest, Chauvin and the other officers several times raised the possibility that Floyd may have been using drugs. “Is he high on something?” Thao asked. “I assume so,” Lane replied. The assumption that the police seemed to make was that Floyd’s being “on something” would be a reason to use violence and threats when arresting him. Such assumptions are commonplace—but why? Wouldn’t it also make sense, if a person was thought to be using drugs, to consider being gentle with them? To imagine that maybe they couldn’t follow directions as quickly or easily, that they might be more likely to be scared or to need help and compassion?

A failure to consider such possibilities puts the lives of people with addiction (and many other undocumented disabilities) at risk. And as Floyd’s story makes clear, this risk is heightened when ableist reactions to undocumented disability intersect with racist stereotypes about Black people. Especially large Black people. Floyd was six feet, four inches tall, and he weighed 220 pounds. Perhaps it was not only because he was Black, but also because he was a large Black man, that Floyd was treated as if he were a dangerous predator instead of a person who was suffering at the hands of violent police. After the ambulance came and took Floyd away, Chauvin tried to justify what he had done, saying, “We gotta control this guy ‘cause he’s ... a sizeable guy and it looks like he’s probably on something.” This is an extraordinary statement. Why should Floyd’s size have anything to do with whether police need to “control” him? This is the myth of the Black male super-predator at work, a myth that dehumanizes and denies vulnerability.

32.2 Barbara Dawson

Would George Floyd have been safe if, instead of finding himself at the mercy of police officers, he found medical providers in control of his fate? Not necessarily. Consider what happened to Barbara Dawson, a 57-year-old Black woman who, around ten o'clock at night on December 20, 2015, was taken by ambulance to Liberty Calhoun Hospital in Blountstown, Florida because she was experiencing severe abdominal pain. After being admitted to the hospital, Dawson continued to feel ill and began to have trouble breathing. She had a long history of respiratory disabilities, and she had nearly been admitted to the hospital 22 times in the past (Thompson 2015). But after Dawson had been in the hospital for several hours, a doctor determined that she was well enough to go home.

Dawson was in excruciating pain and was struggling to breathe. She knew she was seriously ill, and she was afraid she would die without medical care. But the doctor insisted that she was ready to be discharged, and Dawson was ordered to leave the hospital immediately. When she refused—desperately begging the staff to help her—they called the police.

Keep in mind that Dawson was 57 years old. She was moaning in agonizing pain. It might seem inexplicable, then, that the healthcare workers felt the need to call the police. But Dawson was caught at a deadly intersection of multiple vectors of oppression. As with George Floyd's death, the most obvious form of prejudice that Dawson faced was racism. More specifically, Dawson was dealing with *misogynoir*, a term coined by Moya Bailey to name a toxic fusion of racism and misogyny that envisions Black women as not worthy of the protection and care often afforded to white women (Bailey 2021). Railey Tassin has persuasively argued that the myth of the "strong Black woman" influenced the medical staff's murderously negligent disregard for Barbara Dawson's life (Tassin 2019). As Tassin observes, "this stereotypical image erases any place for black women to be taken seriously in the face of pain, weakness, or any form of vulnerability" (Tassin 2019). As a result, Dawson was not believed when she said she was suffering; instead, the medical providers to whom she had turned seeking care treated her as if she were a criminal, someone who, as Chauvin said about Floyd, needed to be brought under "control."

In the early hours of the morning, officer John Tadlock entered Dawson's room and ordered her to leave the hospital immediately. An audio tape of Tadlock's interactions with Dawson has been made publicly available, and it is excruciating to listen to.³ The panic in Dawson's voice is evident when Tadlock appears. When Tadlock tries to take away her oxygen mask, she says, "You can't take that!"

"Yes, I can," he replies, ordering her to put her hands up so that she can be handcuffed and arrested. "No, no, no," she says over and over. "Do you hear this? I'm really feeling sick here," Dawson tells Tadlock. She is moaning, "Oh my God," over and over, clearly in horrible pain.

Apparently, all Tadlock sees is a Black woman who is irrationally resisting arrest. Calmly, and without a trace of sympathy for the intense suffering that Dawson is obviously experiencing—suffering which, he seems to assume, she must be faking—he tells her that she will be arrested for trespassing if she doesn't leave with him right then. He uses the condescending tone one might take with a disobeying child. He keeps saying things like, "You've had every opportunity."

The dialogue captured on the audio recording as Tadlock escorts Dawson from the hospital is eerily similar to the verbal interchange between Floyd and the police who killed him. Again and again, Dawson begs Tadlock, "Please help me! I can't breathe!" But he doesn't believe her, and his reasoning is the same that, four and a half years later, the police would use against Floyd. "You seem to be breathing okay right now," Tadlock tells Dawson. "You're talking; you're breathing; I need you to please put your hands behind your back."

Dawson keeps gasping in pain. "I can't breathe. Help me, please, God help me," she begs. Finally, in the parking lot outside the hospital, Dawson collapses on the ground. Still, she is not believed. "Please don't fall down," Tadlock says. Recall that the same thing would be said to Floyd—the assumption being that if a Black person falls down during an arrest, they must be doing it on purpose, even if they repeatedly say that they are experiencing debilitating suffering. "Come on now, Ms. Dawson. Falling down like this, laying down, that's not going to stop you from going to jail," Tadlock admonishes, still in the same patronizing tone, which betrays no hint of belief that Dawson is really ill. It is hard to escape the impression that the real issue, for the police officer, is not any threat that Dawson might implausibly be said to pose but rather a feeling that Dawson needed to be punished for "not complying" with his orders.

Soon after she fell to the ground, Dawson stopped speaking and became unconscious. At this point, one might imagine that it would occur to the police officer that maybe there had been a mistake. Was it possible, he might have wondered, that she actually was ill? But this thought seems not to occur to Tadlock. Nor does it occur to the three medical professionals—two nurses (Karen Wylene Taylor and Jennifer Dawn Waldorff) and one EMT (Brandon Drew Peacock)—who then join Tadlock in the parking lot. At one point, a nurse checks her vital signs and, since the readings she gets are in the normal range, concludes that Dawson must be faking. In some ways, this is how undocumentedly disabled people of all races are frequently treated in medical settings: no matter how sick one says one feels, one is likely to be disbelieved if one's symptoms are not documented by medical tests.

But when racism intersects with prejudice against people with undocumented disabilities, this dynamic becomes even more dangerous. Rather than guessing that Dawson is imagining symptoms or is mistaking emotional distress for physical pain—as healthcare providers often assume when white people report undocumented symptoms—the medical staff assumes that Dawson is deliberately faking. One of the nurses says, "Ms. Dawson, get up! There's nothing wrong with you. And I know you can hear us." The medical staff and the police are thus in complete alignment. Later, Tadlock will recount that he thought Dawson was faking her disability to avoid going to jail—a conclusion that ignored the question of why, if she were not ill, Dawson went to the hospital in the first place.

Tadlock begins trying to lift Dawson, who is still unconscious, into the police car. Several minutes later, he calls for reinforcements. "I've got a large female that's refusing to get in the vehicle," he radios. Shortly thereafter, the dashcam video shows medical staff members trying to help Tadlock force Dawson, who is still unconscious and collapsed on the ground, into the police car. Other healthcare workers can be seen in the background, calmly walking around.

Tadlock then calls for police reinforcements again. "I have a 275-pound Black female who is being non-compliant, laying on the ground," he says. His reference to Dawson's race is telling. After all, it's not as if Tadlock were giving information that would enable another officer to identify a person whose whereabouts were unknown. Had this been the case, it might have been reasonable for Tadlock to mention Dawson's race, along with other information about her appearance, such as a description of the clothes she was wearing. But in this situation, such information was clearly irrelevant—as was Dawson's race—because Dawson was right there with Tadlock, lying motionless on the ground.

The phrase "a 275-pound Black female" indicates something else, something beyond any practical concern. It suggests that Dawson's body is seen as a problem, that her fatness and Blackness—as well as her undocumented disability, her refusal to stop visibly manifesting acute bodily distress, despite medical providers' assurances that there is "nothing wrong with her"—put her outside the realm of human sympathy and care, rendering her instead an inconvenience,

a nuisance. Turning again to Dawson, Tadlock says, “Ms. Dawson, I’d really like you to get in this car. You’ve caused a lot of us a lot of headache, a lot of aggravation.”

As Dawson literally lies dying at his feet, Tadlock is more concerned about the “aggravation” that, he believes, *she* is causing *him*. No doubt, the police and medical staff believe what they are saying. Dawson is Black; she is female; she has undocumented disabilities; and she is fat. For some combination of these reasons, it seems not to cross the minds of these police officers and medical providers that Dawson should be believed when she says she can’t breathe, says that she is dying.

But Dawson was dying. She was experiencing a pulmonary embolism, a blood clot in her lung. Finally, after she had been lying in the parking lot for almost 18 minutes, the doctor who had discharged her came out. He re-admitted Dawson to the hospital, saying that she now seemed very different from when he had discharged her. But it was too late. She died shortly after. The hospital later defended itself by saying that pulmonary embolisms are difficult to treat; in other words, they implied, Dawson would have died anyway. This is not true. As an article in *Clinical Cardiology* explains, “Emergency management [of pulmonary embolism] is usually highly effective”; however, if left untreated, “most patients die within the first hours of presentation,” for which reason “early diagnosis is of paramount importance” (Bělohávek et al. 2013, 129).

After Dawson’s death, the medical examiner wrote that her pulmonary embolism was caused by her being “excessively overweight.” This claim—which implicitly blames Dawson for her own death—was reported uncritically in dozens of media articles. But body size is not a major predictor of one’s likelihood of developing pulmonary embolism, a condition that thin people also get (Bělohávek et al. 2013, 130). What’s more, while the medical profession loves to blame every illness (and every death) of every fat person on their size, fatness has never been shown to cause any disease. True, fatness is *correlated* with some disabilities and illnesses (as is thinness), but correlation is not the same as causation. One reason that people whom doctors label “obese” tend to have slightly shorter life expectancies than those deemed “normal”-weight is that, as Dawson’s story illustrates, fat people often receive substandard—and downright violent—medical care.

These “explanations” of Dawson’s death—explanations that make it seem as if the police and the medical providers who mistreated her had no responsibility—are mirrored by similar explanations that were given, by Chauvin’s defense attorney, for George Floyd’s death. According to lawyer Eric Nelson, Floyd did not die because a knee was pressed against his neck for nine minutes. Instead, Nelson claimed, “Mr. Floyd died of a cardiac arrhythmia that occurred as a result of hypertension, coronary disease, the ingestion of methamphetamine and fentanyl, and the adrenaline flowing through his body.” Fortunately, the jury rejected this ludicrous claim, and Chauvin was found guilty of murdering Floyd. In Dawson’s case, no one was held criminally responsible; Tadlock faced no consequences whatsoever; and a judge dismissed a wrongful death suit that Dawson’s family filed against the hospital. In response to other civil charges, the hospital paid a settlement of \$200,000 to Dawson’s family, an insultingly small sum of money for their complicity in Dawson’s death.

A murderous cop going to jail, and a hospital paying a pittance to the family of a person in whose death they were complicit: none of this can bring back these two lives that were lost, two lives that were but a fraction of the many Black lives that have been stolen under white supremacy. If we are serious about stopping anti-Black violence, then we need to eradicate it everywhere it appears. That means that we must be intersectional in our analysis and activism, calling attention to the multiple, interlocking systems of oppression—including racism, ableism,

misogynoir, sizeism, and fatphobia—that imperil Black lives and demanding an end to these unjust ideologies everywhere: not only in the police and legal system but also in a wide range of other institutions, including the medical profession.

Notes

- 1 Examples of scholarship and activism at the intersections of race and disability are numerous to list in full; but see Bell 2012; Pickens 2017; and Sins Invalid 2019.
- 2 A transcript of Floyd’s arrest can be found at www.twincities.com/2020/07/09/george-floyd-transcript-read-it-in-full-here/.
- 3 The dashcam recording can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHmqicpZSzQ.

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INTERSECTING PANDEMICS

Violence, a virus, and Américo Paredes

Julie Minich

On Sunday, May 24, 2020, *The New York Times* ran no articles on its front page, only a single headline with a list of names and brief notes about the people they designated, all of whom had died from complications of COVID-19: “U.S. Deaths Near 100,000, an Incalculable Loss” (*The New York Times* 2020). The following day, the white police officer Derek Chauvin murdered a Black man named George Floyd in Minneapolis. The COVID-19 pandemic and the uprising that followed Floyd’s murder came to define the summer of 2020 in the United States, which grappled with the state negligence laid bare by the pandemic and the terror inflicted upon communities of color by white supremacist policing. News outlets began discussing the “twin pandemics” of 2020, designating both the rapid spread of a novel coronavirus and the state-sponsored violence of racialized police killings.

The concept of “twin pandemics”—both the phrase itself and the effort to seek justice for Floyd in the COVID-19 crisis—offers an opportunity to examine what Alison Kafer and Eunjung Kim call “the inevitable incompleteness of intersectionality” (2017, 124). “Twin pandemics” calls to mind Susan Sontag’s famous warning that “only in the most limited sense is any historical event or problem like an illness” (1989, 85). And yet there is an undeniable link between the damage of COVID-19 and the state’s disregard for the lives of racialized people. In using the word “pandemic” to describe the damage of both a disease and white supremacy, what do we convey? Do we inadvertently conflate racial justice protests with a virus? Or do we highlight the public health effects of systemic racism? Given that the COVID-19 crisis was experienced by many as a sudden transformation, does the phrase “twin pandemics” depict white supremacy, too, as a bounded historical event rather than a defining (and ongoing) facet of US life? Or does the phrase align the chronicity of racial violence with what Ellen Samuels and Elizabeth Freeman (2021) call “crip temporalities”? The phrase prompts such questions not only because illness metaphors are fraught—as Sontag argues—but because it represents an effort to address the relationship between two social crises that are often treated as distinct phenomena. An ethnic studies scholar, perhaps mindful of Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s famous definition of racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (2007, 28), might interpret the phrase differently from a scholar of disability studies, where the influence of Sontag’s polemic against illness metaphors has fomented skepticism toward them.¹ In short, “twin pandemics” is a loaded phrase because intersectionality itself is, as Kafer and Kim note, inevitably incomplete.

This chapter seeks to contribute to an assessment of intersectional disability studies. This assessment—already occurring in the individual and collaborative work of Kafer and Kim as well as in the work of Sami Schalk and Jina B. Kim (individually and collaboratively), Moya Bailey and Izetta Autumn Mobley (individually and collaboratively), Nirmala Erevelles, Jasbir K. Puar, and others examine what *intersectionality* means for a field that continues to locate its origins in predominantly white disability rights/pride movements originating in the global north. I will first present some of the challenges that the above-named scholars articulate for intersectional disability studies before discussing a short story by 20th-century Mexican-American writer and public intellectual Américo Paredes. Throughout the summer of 2020, as I witnessed simultaneous surges of the Movement for Black Lives and COVID-19, I was engaged in the mundane work of revamping a syllabus for an interdisciplinary undergraduate course on Latinx expressive culture and public health, one I had not taught in several years. The course features Paredes’ “The Hammon and the Beans,” a short story addressing both health inequality and the racial terror unleashed in south Texas by the Texas Rangers, acting in concert with white vigilantes, in the early 20th century. This chapter ends, then, with the reading of that story that 2020 offered me, which I offer to explore how theories of intersectionality and disability reorient each other.

33.1 Intersectionality and disability studies

Although disability scholarship has a long history, disability studies as a scholarly field with an institutional presence is a recent phenomenon. Indeed, disability studies has effectively become institutionalized within the context of what Jennifer C. Nash calls the *intersectionality wars*, debates about the origins, relevance, and (mis)uses of intersectionality theory. Although the 1990 Americans With Disabilities Act is neither the starting point of disability scholarship nor the culminating achievement of disability activism, it has nurtured the visibility of both disabled people and disability scholarship on US university campuses—and its passage falls between the publication dates of the two essays by Kimberlé Crenshaw that brought the concept of intersectionality into critical circulation: “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (1989) and “Mapping the Margins” (1991). In other words, intersectionality’s rise to prominence coincides with the professionalization of disability studies—a convergence that affects how disability studies has positioned itself institutionally.²

In the quest for institutional legitimacy and critical currency, disability studies often presents itself both as a source of much-needed intersectionality and as in need of the intersectionality acquired through encounters with other interdisciplines. For instance, in a foundational text in feminist disability studies, Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes: “Integrating disability into feminist theory is generative, broadening our collective inquiries, questioning our assumptions, and contributing to feminism’s intersectionality” (2002, 4). More recently, as the limited engagement with race in disability studies remains openly acknowledged and lamented, David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder suggest that “we desperately need more intersectional coordinates on the map of disability studies” (2019, 665). The former approach—treating disability as a source of intersectionality that benefits other fields—risks portraying disability studies as a successor “of fields and categories that are played out, appearing just in time to correct their mistakes” (Kafer and Kim 2017, 126). Meanwhile, the latter—seeking out intersectional coordinates on the map of disability studies—risks instrumentalizing activists, intellectuals, and artists of color: mapping them onto an established route without considering their desired destination point.

The history of *The Disability Studies Reader (DSR)*, a volume edited by Lennard J. Davis and published by Routledge in (as of this writing) five editions between 1997 and 2017, offers a lens through which to examine the field’s engagement with intersectionality. As its title suggests,

the book sought to trace the establishment of a field, and the series of editions offers one version of that story, visible in the prefaces in which Davis explains his editorial choices for each new edition. In his first such preface, from the second edition, he asserts that a “first wave” of disability scholars developed the field’s “foundational ideas, assembling a coherent identity for a wide range of impairments, and pushing for respect, recognition, and research” (Davis 2006, xiii) while a “second wave” of scholars, benefiting from “the safety and security of having a field to enter, having an identity to discuss, and having a body of knowledge with which to deal” (Davis 2006, xiii) pose new questions. Davis elaborates that “among the paramount issues is a questioning of the biases, prejudices, and ideology of disability toward minorities, ethnicities, and racialized groups” (2006, xiii). In the 2006 edition, this “paramount issue” is contained within a section called “The Question of Identity,” which includes an essay by Chris Bell entitled “Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal” that critiques the racial exclusions of the field. For the third edition (2010), which appeared in print after Bell’s death, the essay was retitled as “Is Disability Studies Actually White Disability Studies?” and the section in which it appears was also retitled as “Identities and Intersectionalities,” reflecting the scholarly currency that intersectionality had by then acquired. Although “Identities and Intersectionalities” remained a consistent section of the volume through the fifth edition, Bell’s essay did not; it was omitted from the fourth edition (2013) before being restored (under the new title) for the fifth (2017). Furthermore, the “Identities and Intersectionalities” section has always followed one called “Theorizing Disability,” which has the unfortunate effect of suggesting that “intersectionality” and “theory” are distinct endeavors.

A sixth edition of the *DSR* was scheduled to appear in 2021, also with the “Identities and Intersectionalities” section and also without Bell’s essay, but plans for that edition were put on hold. Twenty-two scholars and artists whose work was slated to appear in the volume (including me) learned of our inclusion only after Routledge published the table of contents on its website; we then signed a co-authored open letter critiquing Davis’ editorial practices around the very issues of race, nation, gender, and sexuality that intersectionality theory addresses:

We condemn the *DSR*’s lack of accountability to communities committed to disability justice informed scholarship and, moreover, its tokenizing approach to writers and bodies of knowledge, most notably through the process of canonizing white scholars (who have steadily comprised the opening chapters of this book since its inception) while treating authors of color, women, queer, trans, and nonbinary authors, authors from the global south, and young scholars—as well as essays on race, intellectual disabilities, non-US perspectives, and other underrepresented topics—as supplemental, even interchangeable.

(*DSR6 Collective Statement 2021*)

In effect, the *DSR* tells *one* story about disability studies: the triumphant emergence of a field that paved the way for new, more intersectional inquiry; meanwhile, those protesting the publication of the sixth edition told a different story, one in which foundational ideas in the field themselves constitute a barrier to intersectional inquiry. As Puar has written in a different context: “Much like the language of diversity, the language of intersectionality, its very invocation, it seems, largely substitutes for intersectional analysis itself” (2012, 53).

Scholars of disability and race suggest instead that intersectionality fundamentally reorients disability studies. One example is Bell himself, whose *DSR* essay is the first in the volume to introduce the concept of intersectionality, via a quote from Ann duCille: “one of the dangers of standing at an intersection ... is the likelihood of being run over” (1994, 593). Bell engages

duCille to suggest that scholarship and activism prioritizing any perspective beyond disability rights (like racial justice) are “run over, forgotten” (2006, 279)—in other words, that the field is structured by single-axis, *not* intersectional, focus. More recently, Bailey and Mobley explicitly “use Black feminism’s clarion call for intersectional analysis” (2019, 23) to explore what they call a Black feminist disability framework. In this essay, they cite one of the field’s major premises—the critique of the medical model, or the rejection of the idea that disability is a medical concern—as an obstacle to intersectionality:

While the critique of the medical model of disability is not only warranted but critical, it is also important to remember that, for some, talking about having access to healing therapies offered by the medical field is part of addressing the medical field’s long disinvestment in Black health. . . . While certainly the medical model is a problematic trope, it may signal differently to communities that have tried for many decades to receive the most elementary care only to be refused.

(2019, 28)

Scholars like Bell, Bailey, and Mobley thus challenge the idea that intersectionality simply happens whenever race (or gender, or nation, or class, or sexuality) is “added” to disability analysis (or vice versa). Instead, they argue that intersectional work is fundamentally transformational, that intersectional disability studies offers different knowledge than does the dominant scholarship in the field.

The remainder of this essay departs from the claim that intersectional disability scholarship cannot be predicated on an absolute rejection of the medical model and the notion of cure. Bailey and Mobley are not alone in this argument. Eunjung Kim argues that engagement with wars, colonial exploitation, and repressive political regimes requires addressing “both disability and cure beyond the binary framework of affirmation or disavowal” (2017, 19). Erevelles notes that the dominant impulse among disability scholars to theorize disability “as a possibility rather than a limit” (2011, 17) makes it difficult to frame health care access as a disability issue. Schalk and Kim call for “a critical and expansive approach to health/care” (2020, 46) as a vital element of what they name feminist-of-color disability studies. And Eli Clare identifies the “anti-cure politics” (2017, 61) of disability activists as a source of exclusion in the movement. With these thinkers in mind, I turn to Paredes to examine his engagement with the “twin pandemics” of racialized health disparities and state-sanctioned white supremacist violence in the early 20th century. Paredes is likely to be an unfamiliar figure to disability scholars, which is precisely why I engage his work here. Like many of the scholars cited so far, I believe that disability studies cannot claim intersectionality without reconsidering its claims, questioning its presuppositions, and reassessing the cultural objects assumed to constitute its archive.

33.2 “The Hammon and the Beans”

If, as Nash notes, intersectionality is imagined “as an unqualified ethical good and ‘more’ intersectionality as an even better ethical good” (2019, 16), Paredes might seem an odd choice. Disability scholars who do not recognize his name will likely recognize the landscapes of his work via the writing of another Mexican–American public intellectual often claimed as an intersectional disability theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa; they may wonder why I don’t turn to Anzaldúa here. Both Paredes and Anzaldúa locate their work in the Texas–Mexico border region known as the Rio Grande Valley, where they were born less than 30 years and 30 miles apart (Paredes in 1915 in Brownsville, TX; Anzaldúa in 1942 in Harlingen, TX). Yet the two represent distinct intellectual

trajectories. Unlike Anzaldúa, coeditor of the feminist classic *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983) and author of the iconic multigenre text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Paredes' work—characterized by titles like *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1958) and *George Washington Gómez* (1990)—is largely concerned with masculine hero/anti-hero narratives. Where Paredes embraced and was embraced by institutions, earning a Ph.D., and securing a faculty position at the University of Texas at Austin,³ Anzaldúa did not (and was not), working until her death without secure employment. Finally, while Anzaldúa did not identify as disabled, she lived with conditions (like diabetes) that others classify as disabilities;⁴ Paredes neither identified as disabled nor experienced impairment for most of his life. But if, as disability justice activist Mia Mingus observes, “intersectionality is not just talking about the places you're oppressed, but also the places where you have privilege” (2010), Paredes' work illuminates a possible intersection between disability studies and Latinx studies. Indeed, he offers significant insights to disability theory, and disability theory likewise makes available new interpretations of his work.

Paredes' short story “The Hammon and the Beans” is a foundational text in Mexican–American literary studies. It also offers a powerful illustration of what Jasbir Puar (following Julie Livingston 2005) calls debility, or the “ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering” (Puar 2017, 1). Its attention to the social dynamics of life on the US–Mexico border, the result of colonial impositions that began with the Spanish conquest, continued with the US appropriation of Texas in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and endure after his death with ongoing efforts by politicians like Donald Trump and Greg Abbott to construct a border wall, necessitates the representation of acute health disparities. In his academic writing, Paredes describes the aftermath of the US invasion:

It was the Treaty of Guadalupe that added the final element to Rio Grande society, a border. The river, which had been a focal point, became a dividing line. Men were expected to consider their relatives and closest neighbors, the people just across the river, as foreigners in a foreign land. A restless and acquisitive people, exercising the rights of conquest, disturbed the old ways.

(1958, 15)⁵

The physical and psychic toll of this bifurcation forms the backdrop for Paredes' writing, including “The Hammon and the Beans,” which—like most of Paredes' fiction—is set in a town called Jonesville-on-the-Grande, based on his hometown of Brownsville.

Paredes alludes throughout “The Hammon and the Beans” to the “border troubles,” a period of intense anti-Mexican violence in Texas. In the early twentieth century, the Mexican Revolution spurred both increased immigration from Mexico and anti-Mexican sentiment, and Mexican–American revolutionaries Aniceto Pizaña and Luis de la Rosa responded with an attempt to reclaim Mexican territory through guerrilla warfare. The effort to subdue revolutionary fervor and deter immigration by law enforcement and civilians alike was vicious. Historian Monica Muñoz Martinez writes:

The decade between 1910 and 1920 was a particularly brutal period, when ethnic Mexicans were criminalized and harshly policed by an intersecting regime of vigilantes, state police, local police, and army soldiers. During these years of vitriol and aggression, law enforcement officers, soldiers, and vigilantes claimed the lives of hundreds more ethnic Mexicans, citizens of the United States and Mexico alike.

(2018, 7)

The violence was so widespread that in 1919 the Texas Legislature conducted an investigation, led by Representative José Tomás Canales (then the only Mexican—American member of the state legislature), into atrocities committed by the Texas Rangers. Anglo defense of the Rangers was fierce, and Canales was repeatedly threatened. The legislature cleared the Rangers of wrongdoing. Martinez characterizes this impunity as “a past that bleeds into the present, a suppression that continues to shape our future” (2018, 10). To me, this history also resonates with recent work by Puar, who argues that the organizing practices of Black Lives Matter and Palestinian solidarity are not merely “allied” with disability justice but should be understood “collectively as a disability justice movement itself, as a movement that is demanding an end to so many conditions of precaritization that debilitate many populations” (2017, xxiv; original emphasis). How does our understanding of disability studies and its intersections change if we similarly recognize early 20th-century ethnic Mexican resistance to white supremacist violence in south Texas (to use Puar’s phrasing) *as a disability justice movement itself*?

The narrator of “The Hammon and the Beans” is an unnamed, middle-class, Mexican—American boy of elementary school age; its plot centers around the illness and death of Chonita, an impoverished young girl of roughly the same age. The narrator explains: “Chonita’s mother did our washing, in gratefulness—as my mother put it—for the use of a vacant lot of my grandfather’s which was a couple of blocks down the street” (1994, 5). The neighborhood where the narrator and Chonita live is adjacent to Fort Jones, a recently fortified military base: “It was because of the border troubles, ten years or so before, that the soldiers had come back to old Fort Jones” (1994, 4). Because she helps to feed her family by begging for food from the post kitchen, Chonita is the only character who moves between the local community and the base: “The wandering soldiers whom the bugle called home at night did not wander in our neighborhood, and none of us ever went into Fort Jones. None except Chonita” (1994, 5). The narrator’s friends routinely taunt Chonita, asking her to make speeches in English and laughing as she combines the Spanish word *jamón* with the English *ham* to demand: “Give me the hammon and the beans!” (1994, 6). The narrator reports this with some guilt, noting that he thinks it a “pretty poor joke” (1994, 6). Eventually, he becomes severely ill with “chills and fever” (1994, 7); when Dr. Zapata, the community physician, pays a visit, the narrator overhears him tell his father that Chonita has died. The story concludes with the narrator crying, unable to sleep, as he imagines Chonita in heaven, wearing “her torn and dirty dress, with a pair of bright wings attached, flying round and round like a butterfly” (1994, 9).

In the definitive critical study of Paredes, Ramón Saldívar notes that “The Hammon and the Beans” depicts not the border troubles themselves but their cultural repercussions, “the racial hatred and political tension that has persisted to the present day in south Texas in the aftermath of the bitter fighting” (2006, 294). The story’s opening pages describe how the rhythms of life in Jonesville-on-the-Grande are set to the sounds emanating from Fort Jones, from the “cannon’s roar” (1994, 3) that wakes the town to the “whistle from the post laundry” (1994, 3) that starts the school day and signals the end of the lunch break; this introductory description imbues Jonesville-on-the-Grande with “all the feel of a town suffering under the heel of occupation by victorious foreign army” (Saldívar 2006, 295). The context of occupation is critical to understanding the significance of Chonita’s death, even as we never definitively learn the cause: “Pneumonia, flu, malnutrition, worms, the evil eye ... What the hell difference does it make?” (1994, 7), asks Dr. Zapata when the narrator’s father inquires how she died. The doctor becomes emotional as he describes Chonita’s father’s apparent indifference: “Do you know what that brute of a father was doing when I left? He was laughing! Drinking and laughing with his friends” (1994, 7). This prompts the narrator’s father to explain that this man was, in fact, Chonita’s stepfather: “This the woman’s second husband [...]. First one died before the girl was

born, shot and hanged from a mesquite limb. He was working too close to the tracks the day the Olmito train was derailed” (1994, 8). The “Olmito train” refers to a historical atrocity committed by Texas Ranger Captain W.T. Ransom: In October 1915, raiders derailed a train in Olmito (between Brownsville and Harlingen), and Ransom—assisted by civilian vigilantes—indiscriminately captured and murdered ten nearby Mexican men. With this reference, then, Paredes suggests a link between the circumstances of Chonita’s apparently “natural” death of treatable illness and the earlier border violence, presenting both the poverty that prevented Chonita from receiving adequate medical care and her father’s murder as instantiations of racialized violence.

Even as Paredes records the collective trauma of anti-Mexican violence in Texas, he also makes visible the effects of gender and social class on the distribution of that trauma. The fact that the story is narrated by a middle-class Mexican-American boy—despite its concern with the death of an impoverished Mexican-American girl—is significant. As noted, the narrator is uncomfortable with the way his friends mock Chonita but does not intervene, instead wondering “how long it would be before they got tired of it all” (1994, 6–7). He becomes ill, likely with the same illness that kills Chonita, and recovers while she dies. In addition to noting these details, the narrator observes how adults around him discuss Chonita and her family: from the way his mother characterizes the fact that Chonita’s mother does his family’s laundry as an act of “gratefulness” (1994, 5) rather than an economic transaction to Dr. Zapata’s disparaging comments about her stepfather. Paredes frequently critiques not just the Anglo usurpers in south Texas but also the Mexican-Americans of the middle and upper classes who accede to white dominance to protect their social and economic standing. His novel *George Washington Gómez* (originally written during the 1930s), for instance, bitingly observes the lack of solidarity among rich and poor Mexican-Americans:

While there are rich Negroes and poor Negroes, rich Jews and poor Jews, rich Italians and Poles and poor Italians and Poles, there are in Texas only poor Mexicans. Spanish-speaking people in the Southwest are divided into two categories: poor Mexicans and rich Spaniards. So while rich Negroes often help poor Negroes and rich Jews help poor Jews, the Texas-Mexican has to shift for himself.

(1990, 195–6)

In “The Hammon and the Beans,” Paredes stages this critique by locating the narration in a middle-class family, exposing how the class prejudices and privileges of those in the narrator’s social circle preclude intraethnic solidarity.

The gender difference between the narrator and Chonita is similarly significant. The masculine emphasis of Paredes’ work is widely acknowledged: Martinez, who credits him with correcting celebratory narratives about the Texas Rangers, notes that he is “equally patriarchal and celebratory of armed masculinity” (2018, 24); and even Saldívar (a mentee and friend of Paredes) concedes that the “masculinist ideologies and [...] unrelentingly obdurate patriarchal hierarchies” (2006, 9) that inform his writings constitute “limitations that his work could neither wholly articulate nor fully escape” (2006, 9). Paredes’ preoccupation with masculinity is certainly evident in “The Hammon and the Beans,” which highlights violence against a laboring Mexican male body (that of Chonita’s father). However, by linking Chonita’s death to her father’s, Paredes gestures toward a broader understanding of racial violence. In effect, he depicts Chonita’s death as a form of what Rob Nixon calls slow violence: “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2011, 2). In this way, Paredes—perhaps inadvertently—creates a space to question how the very definition of violence is gendered. It

might be a stretch to call this story *feminist*, but I would nonetheless posit that it invites (and contributes to) intersectional analysis. As Kafer and Kim argue, intersectional analysis “cannot be limited to marginalized identities and subject positions, but must also be applied to dominant positions and the structures that create them” (2017, 129). The narrator imagines that, had she survived, Chonita would have led a social justice movement during the Depression:

In later years I thought of her a lot, especially during the thirties when I was growing up. Those years would have been just made for her. Many’s the time I have seen her in my mind’s eye, in the picket lines demanding not bread, not cake, but the hammon and the beans.

(1994, 7)

Saldívar interprets this vision of Chonita “as a forerunner of Paredes’ own childhood heroine, the great Depression-era labor organizer and secretary of the Communist Party of Texas, Emma Tenayuca” (2006, 299). I would extend this interpretation to emphasize how Paredes, grappling with the failure of the masculinized resistance he often glorifies (represented by Pizaña, a distant legend for the young narrator), here locates the possibility for revolution in a young *girl*, reflecting a latent awareness that, as Crenshaw put it, “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (1989, 140).

While the intersections of race, class, and gender in the story are evident, my characterization of Paredes as offering a framework for intersectional *disability* studies might still give some readers pause. Chonita’s revolutionary potential is foreclosed by her death, a fact that certainly illuminates the debilitation of the ethnic Mexican population of south Texas in the wake of US annexation but does not lead to a celebratory claiming of disability. Indeed, some scholars have proposed a distinction between disability studies and theories of debilitation, arguing that the latter evacuates disability studies of its specificity: “*debility studies might be ultimately understood as disability studies without disability*” (Mitchell and Snyder 2019, 665; original emphasis).⁶ To answer this I invoke Erevelles, who has sought to direct the field toward a critique of the social structures that concentrate disability within particular populations: “How is disability celebrated if its very existence is inextricably linked to the violence of social/economic conditions of capitalism?” (2011, 17). Paredes’ choice to end “The Hammon and the Beans” with Chonita’s death is a characteristically Paredes move; his work is often angry and cynical, and even his humor can be scathing. Like the narrator who imagines Chonita as a revolutionary leader before recounting her death, Paredes often offers his readers a fleeting vision of justice only to pull them back into the material conditions of our deeply unjust world—a world in which (as Jina B. Kim trenchantly observed in a state-of-the-field essay aptly published just at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic) “disability, debility, and illness have emerged as primary arenas for racialized punishment” (2020, 266).

A century after the state-sanctioned killings of ethnic Mexicans that provides the brutal context for Chonita’s death, the border remains militarized and the region that surrounds it marked by stark inequality. An estimated 30% of Rio Grande Valley residents lack health insurance and live below the poverty line. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, its rates of diabetes—a major risk factor for COVID-19 complications—were sobering, with diabetic amputations in the region exceeding the national average by 50 percent (Novack 2019). Throughout the summer of 2020, the summer of the George Floyd protests, the Rio Grande Valley experienced one of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in the nation (Weber 2020). “The Hammon and the Beans,” linking state-sanctioned violence and contagious disease, prompts us to understand these contemporary conditions as an extension of the region’s histories of colonization. In

effect, the story makes clear that racial justice cannot be achieved without disability justice and vice versa. Ironically, this is a fact also recognized by Greg Abbott, the Governor of Texas who sought aggressively to loosen public health measures limiting the spread of COVID-19 even as the state's caseloads soared. "The new positive cases that we are seeing are largely the result of isolated hot spots in nursing homes, jails, and meat packing plants" (Office of the Texas Governor 2020), he declared dismissively at a press conference in June 2020. With this statement, he effectively announced the populations he was prepared to sacrifice: the elderly and disabled, the incarcerated (including those in prison and those in immigration detention; in Texas as elsewhere, these are predominantly Black and Latinx people), and immigrant workers. His statement came less than a week before Floyd's funeral in Houston (Floyd's hometown) galvanized a nationwide racial reckoning.

Reading "The Hammon and the Beans" now demonstrates how racialized violence and health inequity cannot be understood as discrete issues. The story calls for an intersectional disability analysis, not only because such an analysis enables a more complete understanding of US–Mexico border history but also because such an analysis enables a more complete understanding of the "twin pandemics" of our contemporary moment. At the same time, a disability analysis of "The Hammon and the Beans" requires reconsidering what might constitute the proper objects of disability analysis. In other words, the story demonstrates that intersectional analysis is profoundly transformational work, fundamentally changing the conversations, the arguments, and the archives in the fields it brings together.

Notes

- 1 Of course, there are many scholars of *both* ethnic and disability studies. Sami Schalk (2017), whose work importantly falls within both, offers a useful discussion of the possibilities and pitfalls of disability metaphors, as well as an argument that reevaluating disability scholars' wariness towards disability metaphor will foment conversation between disability studies and ethnic studies.
- 2 Nash's analysis of conference documents from the National Women's Studies Association suggests that intersectionality's prominence as a critical concept emerged a decade after Crenshaw's articles were published, in the early 21st century; a similar periodization applies to disability studies as an institutionally recognized field of study.
- 3 I owe my current position in UT Austin's Department of Mexican–American and Latina/o Studies to Paredes' work establishing a Center for Mexican American Studies here in 1970.
- 4 Anzaldúa openly resisted claiming disability identification during her lifetime, at one point famously asserting that "'disabled' would reduce me to an even more partial identity than chicana, feminist, queer, & any other genetic/cultural slices-of-the-pie terms do" (2009, 300).
- 5 This description resonates with Anzaldúa's characterization of the US–Mexico border as "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (1987, 25).
- 6 It is worth noting that Puar has been figured as a critic of intersectionality as well as of disability studies, although Nash argues that her more recent writings on intersectionality are "less critique than a critical inquiry surrounding intersectionality's circulation and institutionalization" (2019, 52); I would suggest much the same regarding her relationship to disability studies.

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PART VII

Intersectional science and data studies



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(RE-)IMAGINING BLACK FEMINIST PHYSICS AND ASTRONOMY

Chanda Prescod-Weinstein

Intersectionality, like “diversity, equity and inclusion” (DEI), seems to be the topic of the decade in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Unlike DEI, which emerged as an alternative to more radical cries for racial justice, intersectionality is drawn from Black feminist organizing and theorizing as part of those very same cries for transformational social change. Even so, “intersectionality” has been reconfigured to serve institutional interests. Today, “intersectional feminism” in science is widely understood to mean “promoting women of color in science,” often forgetting its roots in thinking by and about Black women. Intersectionality in this framing is a slight twist on the traditional approach of promoting “women and minorities” in STEM because it is understood that due to changes in the US population, only training white men in science will lead to deficiencies in a “home grown” scientific workforce. Which is to say, intersectionality has increasingly become the language of savvy institutions that know they must pay lip service to the idea of Black women’s humanity and have a genuine need for Black women’s labor, even as they resist the structural changes required to end misogynoir (Bailey 2021).

Despite this cooptation, the Black feminist analytic that undergirds the Black feminist conception of intersectionality remains as a challenge for us to take up. In this chapter, I propose that a Black feminist physics and astronomy is possible, and I outline features I expect Black feminist physics¹ to have. Along the way, I identify how intersectionality as an analytic can serve this work.

34.1 The “ideal” physicist

I situate my analysis in the context of my own story as a Black agender woman physicist whose day-to-day work entails trying to understand what particle comprises the invisible phenomenon widely known as dark matter. I fell in love with the idea that mathematics could be used to describe the physical world, and even make predictions about it, when I was ten years old. Until that point, I just knew I enjoyed the patterns I experienced in math. When it became clear to me that there was power in the language of mathematics, that it could help provide insight into the universe’s most foundational workings, I decided to commit my life using it in exactly that way. This was an easy commitment to make: I was a Black girl from East LA. I knew I had to

have a job. I knew that to do well meant to have a career: to have a kind of power over what job I did in a capitalist world.

The story I tell above about my journey into theoretical physics is one version of what science is: a Black girl's senses tingling; a Black girl making sensible life plans. But there is another version of science too, especially as we enter into the 2020s, a young decade that is already full of climate change catastrophe. As a professional theoretical physicist and Black feminist thinker, I like to remind people that climate change—global warming—is a technological development. The capacity to manipulate equations and materials has made it possible for us to irrevocably damage our planet's ecosystems.

For many, this is just the latest in a string of science-induced social failures. From J. Marion Sims's gynecological experiments on enslaved Black women to the use of nuclear weapons to the Tuskegee Experiment, scientists have often been party to racist violence. One reading of modernity is that imperialist, white supremacist capitalism has only been made possible through the willing complicity of scientists. In science, technology, and society studies, we accept as an axiom that science and society co-construct (Harding 1991). The West as an establishment has maintained its colonial chokehold on the global population in part by using institutionalized science as a source of power. In exchange, scientists get to have white-collar careers and follow their curiosity.

Where, in this equation, does the little Black girl dreaming of liberation and mathematics belong? As the adult version of her, I experience myself as this: a Black feminist in physics, with a world that loves to look on and commend her strength, even as her spirit visibly sags. Even so, on my fridge, I have a note to remind myself of this first love and first fascination with the connection between math and the function of the universe. I trudge forward, carrying Black feminist physics on my shoulders, understanding that my task is not only to solve the problem of dark matter but also to articulate the idea of a Black feminist physics.

Scientists will tell you that the practice of science turns on a specific empirical methodology, the scientific method. This is a nice thought: that science is only the practice of theorizing the world, testing those theories against carefully gathered, trustworthy observations. The challenge is that what constitutes "trustworthy" is tied to the observer and the observer's trustworthiness. In turn, this depends on a concept of meritocracy that evolved at a time when Black people (among others in a global context)—as well as white women, to a less dramatic extent—were generally understood by science to be subhuman. This viewpoint was produced by larger social and economic structures that were in the process of articulating a sense of personhood.

Imani Perry theorizes that during the enlightenment era, the idea of what it meant to be human was constructed around "ideal men or patriarchs": a person who could be sovereign over land in their ownership, a true subject/citizen of the state (Perry 2018, 19–21). Perry convincingly argues that the legal and philosophical definition of personhood becomes socially defining under colonialism, which produces the fictions of white supremacist patriarchy as one of its tools:

The definition of legal persons in the modern era became a matter of statecraft as rules of national sovereignty both asserted dominion over territory and sorted people into those who were legally recognized subjects and those who fell under the dominion of, or in a state of war against, legally recognized subjects.

(Perry 2018, 22)

In other words, the legal person, the ideal patriarch, is not a woman and not a "savage" (Perry 2018, 35).

A Black woman is, in some sense, the total opposite of the ideal patriarch. This is to say that a Black woman, according to the social traditions that governed scientific practice, could not be an ideal, trustworthy observer. Black women are prefigured as the opposite of an “ideal physicist.” The science this produces is one inflected with what I have come to call *white empiricism* (Prescod-Weinstein 2020). Yes, there is data collection, but what data is collected, how that data is collected, and whose data collections is taken seriously is shaped by the identity of the observers and those who judge their work. The standpoint of observers in STEM matters, particularly if they are people who are understood as white in a white supremacist society.

White feminist standpoint theorists have argued that physics is an epistemic exception to the general problem of how the social shapes scientific outcomes (see, e.g., Harding 1991, 77; Code 1991, 33). I articulated the idea of white empiricism because my life as a physicist had taught me that they were wrong and because I believe they are mistakenly bending to the traditional, deeply hierarchical view that physics is the king of the sciences (Morus 2005). There is a kind of fear around physics because it is often necessary to think of physics only in abstract terms that have no obvious relationship with everyday life and have no social manifestation. Too often, theorists of science identify this abstraction with the idea of “objectivity,” the quality of being true without dependence on subjective, social perspectives. The focus on objectivity is a mistake because the ability to perceive that objective truth is always mediated by the scientist, a social creature who is not capable of perfect, unbiased perception. Instead, I propose that we should understand the laws of physics as universal: true everywhere and for everyone. But the process that we undertake in order to uncover these laws is hardly objective.

As a young person, I was enthralled by the idea that there was this thing I could do that was removed from the problems of the social world. I was the child of political activists who were constantly talking about what wasn’t working right, and I loved the idea of an escape away from human subjectivity into objectivity. I imagined a life in theoretical physics would give me that by allowing me to join a community that is deeply committed to collecting data and deeply understanding the world. As I’ve described elsewhere (Prescod-Weinstein 2021), this was not to be. What I found instead was a community with a circumscribed understanding of what data matters, a community that would rather tie its shoelaces together than listen to Black women.

My life in theoretical physics has had its moments of fantastical joy, but those moments are interspersed between experiences with racism, homophobia, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and general rage at all of it. I have watched Black women and others go through their own versions of this and peel off from the world of physics, unable to stomach it anymore or forced to leave rather than being understood as precious, all too rare presences in the field. And when we tell people about what has happened to us, they question our judgment. They discard the data that we provide, that we constitute. White empiricism is the mechanism through which white supremacist patriarchy and all its tendrils are reproduced and upheld in physics.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion! We are told that this is the solution to the problem (Ahmed 2012; Subramaniam 2014; Prescod-Weinstein 2018). But one wonders how it is possible that diversity will save Aiyanna Stanley-Jones, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others (Prescod-Weinstein 2017). Well, we know the answer. Diversity and inclusion do not save Black lives, even though sometimes they allow a few of us to filter into academic spaces. Importantly, those of us who get here do not represent structural change. We represent the structures shifting to accommodate the appearance of change. We do not embody the end of white empiricism, which dangerously produces the conditions for continued co-constitution between scientific communities and white supremacist colonialism, along with its heterocispatrilial, ableist entrails.

This conflict is obvious in the lives of Black women but not only us. The fight over the building of the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) on Mauna a Wākea in Hawaii exemplifies the juxtaposition of what we all might agree is beautiful science—incredible images of the cosmos—and the ugliness of colonialism propping up science—the damaging of Indigenous sovereignty and lands in order to capture those images. Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) who oppose the building of TMT on their homeland, also known as protectors, are often framed as backwards, anti-science spiritualists. In some cases, the tenor has been explicitly racist, for example with emails circulating from astronomers referring to the protectors as “a horde of angry Native Hawaiians” (Dickerson 2015). This is another instance of white empiricism at work: though the protectors have articulated among their reasons for opposition the environmental damage that the facility building will cause to the land, this is not understood as scientific reasoning.

It is perhaps self-serving for me to say, as a theoretical cosmologist who works at the interstices of particle physics and astrophysics, that astronomy, a field that is now arguably a sub-discipline of physics, can be done without colonialism, as compelling as the scientific case for the TMT is. I need to believe that, otherwise, my vocational choice is no longer tenable. With Kanaka genomicist Keolu Fox, I have argued that the protectors are in fact not demanding the end of science (Fox and Prescod-Weinstein 2019). They are demanding the end of colonial science and making a loud call for ethical science (Prescod-Weinstein 2021, 233). Importantly, part of the story involves Kānaka Maoli like Keolu directly challenging white supremacist and colonialist narratives about who they are, articulating themselves as a modern community with a long history of scientific praxis.

In other words, the fight over Maunakea and the ideal observer is in part a fight over what science is and whether it has ever exclusively belonged to the ideal patriarch. A narrow definition of “science” understands it as a practice that developed in Europe as a part of post-enlightenment modernity. Even in this reading, an honest telling of the story would acknowledge that the practice benefited extensively from European colonialism, which supported the global collection of information that was subsequently synthesized by Europeans who had almost exclusive access to the global archive. “Science” is also arguably the professional community that has evolved out of this historical phenomenon. Or the collection of information produced by this community. However, Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu has argued that rational knowledge production is the inheritance of all communities (Wiredu 1980, 37). In the same essay, Wiredu points out Europe’s long history with irrational religious beliefs. The argument suggests that there is no reason to think that Europe has uniquely produced ideal observers and that Africa is fundamentally at a disadvantage in doing so.

My own conclusion is that we cannot escape this practice of gathering information about the world and fitting it into systems that structure our understanding of the universe because this is what humans do. We, *Homo sapiens*, are a curious species. Sylvia Wynter, in conversation with Katherine McKittrick, points to Juan Luis Arsuaga’s idea that we are a storytelling species. Wynter goes on to argue that this means we are *Homo narrans*, comprised of *bios* and *mythoi* (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 25). I believe it is our special compulsion and inheritance to tell stories about the cosmos, and that science is part of this collective praxis. McKittrick has made this point in another way in *Dear Science and Other Stories*, which elucidates how Black thought (broadly construed) is *scientia*, a site of knowledge production about the world (McKittrick 2021).

34.2 Defining Black feminist physics

The fact that this type of work is fundamental to our humanity—and that liberation work is necessary to uphold our humanity—must mean that revolutionary scientists are possible and

Black feminist physics is possible too. For the rest of this chapter, I introduce characteristics that could underpin a Black feminist physics and make it possible to launch Black feminism into space. The work of Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (Hill Collins 2009) provides a useful starting point. Specifically, Hill Collins outlines six distinguishing features of Black feminist thought. First, it recognizes the significance of US Black women's thought as arising from their position as an oppressed group (2009, 25). Second, Black feminism emerges from the process of connecting Black women's experiences with the ideas that arise out of these experiences (28–9). Third, Black women are not a homogeneous group but nonetheless hold a shared standpoint that produces collective resistances (33). Fourth, African–American intellectuals merge action and theory to support ourselves and our communities (37). Fifth, social justice change is a presumed feature and outcome of Black feminist thought (43). Sixth, Black feminist thought is always aware of the matrix of domination—how intersecting oppressions are organized (21)—and understands itself as being in relationship with other struggles for social justice (46).

With this articulation of the characteristics of US Black feminist thought, Hill Collins provided a theoretical framework that captures the qualities of work such as that of the Combahee River Collective and Audre Lorde (The Combahee River Collective 1982; Lorde 2007). An obvious problem with working from Hill Collins's formulation is that as Carol Boyce Davies notes in her biography of Claudia Jones, this definition of Black feminism is circumscribed by a US nationalist sensibility (Boyce Davies 2007, 15). This is a problem not only because the Black African diaspora outside of the United States is much larger than the diaspora within, but also because this articulation does not sufficiently account for the influence of this global diaspora on US Black feminism. For example, Combahee dedicated the opening of the final section of their statement to “Third world women” (The Combahee River Collective 1982, 21). Audre Lorde, who was born in Harlem, New York, was the child of Grenadian and Barbadian parents. As Boyce Davies describes extensively, though Claudia Jones was born and raised in Trinidad, her imprint on US communism and US Black feminist thought through the lens of Marxism was guaranteed by her leading role on women's issues in the US Communist Party.

Geography of course produces distinct local characteristics in theory and culture (see, e.g., Perry 2022). But the borders are porous, producing not just a Black Atlantic but also a sense of a global diaspora (Gilroy 2003). K. Melchor Quick Hall identifies the need for a transnational understanding of Black feminism through the lens of the Black Atlantic:

Given that the transatlantic slave trade dispersed Afro-descendants throughout the Americas and Caribbean, it is incomprehensible that a framework that emerges from the Black experience would not question the usefulness of contemporary states as the appropriate unit of analysis.

(Hall 2020, 2)

Quick Hall utilizes the scholarship of Gruffydd Jones who argues, like Walter Rodney did before them, that the underdevelopment of Africa is a product of a “racialised international order, a form of global structural racism” (Gruffydd Jones 2008, 924–25; Rodney et al. 2018). In other words, the Black African diaspora is linked across colonial borders by the fact of racial colonialism.

Despite these challenges associated with Hill Collins's framing, it can still function as a useful starting point for thinking through the characteristics of Black feminist physics, which I understand to be necessarily transnational in its concerns. This transnationality is necessary not only because of the way the Black African diaspora has historically been linked through white supremacist colonialism, but also because in the Space Age, we are now linked through growing state and corporate interests and presences in the sky.

Mirroring Hill Collins, I articulate six features of Black feminist physics. I use the lens of Joy James's critique of monolithic understandings of Black feminism that ignore some Black women's positive relationship with the idea of the state. I argue for a Black feminist physics in the radical tradition, per James's definitions of liberal Black feminism and radical Black feminism:

Black feminisms that accept the political legitimacy of corporate-state institutional and police power but posit the need for humanistic reform are considered *liberal*. Black feminisms that view female and black oppression as stemming from capitalism, neocolonialism, and the corporate state are generally understood to be *radical*.

(James 2002, 79)

James is pointing to Black women's current and intended relationship with state power, which is the subject of the first articulated feature of Black feminist physics.

First, Black feminist physics seeks to understand how power dynamics are at work in any given system, whether that is a human system or a physical system, and it opposes misogynoirist distributions of social power. Black feminist physicists initiate their analysis of power by seeing the world through the dual lenses of the technical laws of physics and from the social location of Black women and femmes in physics as a marginalized group which produces an epistemology that reflects the interests and standpoint of its creators. Through a transnational lens, Black feminist physics acknowledges that physics as a professional community has had a longstanding relationship with colonial, institutional power. Through these relations the impact of the work of physicists can be global (Harding 1991; Oreskes 2021). We recognize the power dynamics associated with being formally recognized as part of the professional physics community, especially if we hold citizenships and professional appointments associated with Europe and its white-dominated former settler colonies. We also know that owning the property of "physicist" provides us access to power.

Secondly, Black feminist physics recognizes that that complexity is normative. Black feminist physics emerges through understanding the experiences of Black women, femmes, gender non-conforming people, and anyone else who transgresses the bounds of cis manhood. Thus, Black women and others are heterogeneous, rather than a monolith. Across these differences and this complexity, we recognize common challenges and understand solidarity as a key tactic.

Solidarity forms a key piece of the third characteristic of Black feminist physics, which is collectively resistant to oppression, even across and through differences. We understand that this is necessary in order to challenge traditional arrangements of power, including those that accord Black women (and others) with academic appointments in the global north more prestige than other members of our communities as well as our counterparts in the global south and their home communities. We understand that solidarity is a necessary response to the way ascribed identities including class, nationality, gender, disability, and sex can function to divide us.

We know that "physicist" can function as an identity that provides access to power in exchange for being complicit in colonial abuses of power. Because of the historical links between physics, astronomy, and colonial power (see, e.g., Prescod-Weinstein 2021), Black feminist physicists must be especially cautious about what Joy James notes are "conservative attempts to bring 'closure' to or contain the black revolutionary struggles that fueled radical black feminism such as Combahee," which "altered the transformative potential of black feminist ideology" (James 2002, 78). Asking what solidarity requires can motivate us to be suspicious of liberal traps which seek to undercut our efforts to transform the global distribution of power.

Fourthly, Black feminist physics must, therefore, link theory and action. This mirrors the professional physics practice of linking experiments with theory. As professional physicists, we

must be prepared to answer community members who ask us, “What can physics do for my community?” We must be concerned with questions beyond, “How can I make space for myself in physics?” When we answer the latter, it must be situated in the larger social context of the fact of anti-Blackness and specifically misogynoir, which affects not just cis Black women but also trans and gender-nonconforming people across a variety of gender presentations and identities (Bailey 2021).

Fifth, Black feminist physics is naturally comfortable with change and with undercutting and transgressing tradition. Black feminist physics seeks to develop tools that resist the institutionalization that has been naturalized as part of the life of the physicist. Black feminist physicists understand the need to resist institutionalization, including ourselves, our theories, and our practices. Returning to James, we must resist liberal Black feminism, in favor of radical Black feminism knowing, as Audre Lorde urged us to understand, that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 2021, 94). This is not a call for purity, which Shotwell reminds us is impossible (Shotwell 2016).

Rather, we must constantly be aware of what we are fighting for, even as it is impossible to exist outside of this broken system. This can require resisting participation in what I have called the diversity and inclusion racket—including silently accepting institutional uses of “intersectionality”—even when it is beneficial to us professionally (Prescod-Weinstein 2019b). Hearing Nash’s critique of the institutionalization of “intersectionality,” we are persistently prepared to reimagine Black feminism (Nash 2019). This means, for example, not accepting that “intersectional inclusion” into a physics and astronomy that are allied with white supremacist colonialism constitutes Black feminism. We must persistently define Black feminist physics as oppositional to structural oppression and be flexible about the conceptual vocabulary required to do this.

Finally, the sixth characteristic is that Black feminist physics understands itself as linked to cries for justice by other minoritized groups in the physics community as well as cries for justice outside of the physics community. Black feminist physics understands that “Black women’s struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity, empowerment and social justice” (Hill Collins 2009, 46). Knowing that the physicist has an unusual amount of social and political power due to our technical knowledge, we must be aware of how “getting mine” can come at the expense of other oppressed peoples (and other Black people). This means that promoting Black women in physics is not by itself Black feminist physics, which “means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of power which holds it hostage” (Rich 2018, 319).

34.3 Intersectionality as a tool

Hill Collins notes that Black feminist thought “emerges from a tension linking experiences and ideas” (Hill Collins 2009, 28). Therefore, if there is to be a Black feminist physics, it must also emerge from this tension. What I offer here is an opening to a conversation rather than a definitive statement and certainly not a detailed set of guidelines for conjuring Black feminist physics. One may ask what tools have played a role in the emergence of this viewpoint and are available to us as we build on this viewpoint. *Intersectionality* as an analytic frame is part of how we have arrived here, despite the challenges and problems now associated with it.

One version of intersectionality’s history is through its naming by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black woman legal theorist who coined the term in her critical legal theory and critical race theory scholarship (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Hill Collins argues that this moment of coinage, which occurred near simultaneously with Hill Collins’s own coining of “matrix of domination,” is only the best-known evolutionary stage of a concept that had long been a part of Black feminist epistemology (Hill Collins 2019, 121–26). I will not rehearse the arguments

here beyond citing Sojourner Truth proclaiming, “I am a woman’s rights” (Painter 2007, 125); Pauli Murray and Mary Eastwood articulating the phenomenon of “Jane Crow” (Eastwood and Murray 1965); Francis Beal identifying “double jeopardy” (Beal 2008); women of color scientists discussing the “double bind” (Malcom, Brown, and Quick Hall 1976); and the Combahee River Collective’s analysis that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (The Combahee River Collective 1982, 13). In other words, Black women have long understood that race and gender overlap in their lives and have sought to articulate liberation strategies that encompass this knowledge and viewpoint.

At its best, therefore, intersectionality allows us to see the tensions that link experiences and ideas more clearly. In its original formulation, “intersectionality” referred to “particular forms of intersecting oppressions ... Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (Hill Collins 2009, 21). Today, intersectionality has evolved, both linguistically and conceptually. I have begrudgingly come to accept the phrase “intersectional feminist” which is an identifier meant to distinguish such a feminist from a “white feminist”—someone who refuses to acknowledge a feminism that addresses interlocking forms of oppression. If we stick with the original meaning of “intersectional” one might think an “intersectional feminist” is an oppressor. A descriptivist understanding notices that the language has moved on.

Intersectionality is now also recognized as an analytic framework that “invites us to think from ‘both/and’ spaces and to seek justice in crosscutting ways by identifying and addressing the (often hidden) workings of privilege and oppression” (May 2015, 21). Hill Collins has taken it a step further, arguing in *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, that intersectionality is a theory of the social world constituted by core constructs and guiding premises (Hill Collins 2019, 44). As an analytic, intersectionality offers a tool that allows us to make the structure of the matrix of domination visible. By understanding the form and function of the master’s tools, we become more competent at understanding how to set the most effective, most destructive fire.

Black feminist physics, thus, can use intersectionality as an analytic frame and solidarity as an operating basis to advance transnational freedom dreaming from a Black queer feminist perspective. If we think of dreams of the night sky and outer space as a canvas onto which we project our freedom dreams, then we can use the idea of “Black feminism in space” as what we physicists call a *gedanken* experiment, a thought experiment. Intersectionality teaches us to look at the power dynamics of the discourse around space. What does it mean to send Dr. Mae Jemison into space, carrying an Organization of African Unity flag, after *quilombolas* (Black Brazilian descendants of runaway slaves) have been displaced for the building of a spaceport? (Giovanni 1993; Mitchell 2018)

An institutionalized understanding of intersectionality would teach us that our demands are met upon Jemison’s launch and the subsequent launch of other Afro-descended astronauts. However, one must ask if Dr. Sian Proctor’s recent trip into space on SpaceX’s time as a corporate “civilian” astronaut represents a transformation of white supremacist capitalist power dynamics, or if it simply reaffirms them. Today, the *quilombolas* of Alcântara face further displacement as Brazil, in support of a growing private space sector led by SpaceX, seeks to displace the community further. Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò and Enzo Rossi argue that

The professional-managerial and ruling classes are now both racially permeable by law and in practice, but the relationships between groups on average remain. This represents a genuine, non-illusory structural change ... But it is unclear that this makes much difference to the material prospects of the vast majority of people of color or indeed of people in general. (Táíwò and Rossi 2020)

In other words, the power arrangements are the same, even as the ruling classes allow “a bit of color” and “diversity.” Nash has called on us not to accept this as Black feminism, even if it requires us to dispense with intersectionality altogether (Nash 2019).

In 2015, I gave a speech that I later edited and published as “Intersectionality as a Blueprint for Postcolonial Scientific Community Building” (Prescod-Weinstein 2019). I had been asked to talk about intersectionality at the inaugural Inclusive Astronomy meeting but at that moment there was an urgent need to talk about colonialism in the astronomy community because of what was happening at Maunakea. In hindsight, the speech was too oriented toward inclusion in a broken system, and if I am making an effective argument about intersectionality, it was because I had to find a way to talk about it and colonialism in the same breath. I would not write the same speech today. But I also took my first steps toward the arguments that I make in this chapter, reflecting on an idea promoted in the Combahee River Collective’s “A Black Feminist Statement” that our identities can be a launching point for developing a transformative, radical analysis, what they called “identity politics” (The Combahee River Collective 1982, 16).

Despite my heightened awareness of the co-optation of “intersectionality” as a vocabulary and the institutionalization of its most visible theorists (academics), I remain optimistic that it remains a functional critical social theory and analytic tool that can help us appreciate how power works in our world. Through understanding our own experiences of interlocking oppression (or our lack thereof), we can recognize how the uneven distribution of social power upholds capitalist colonialist white supremacist patriarchy. Whether we call it intersectionality or not, that ability to comprehend the function of power and *how* the uneven distribution occurs can make radical transformation possible. Importantly, in this future we are fighting for, theoretical cosmology has not come to an end but has in fact been liberated. The night sky and a deep curiosity about how the universe works is our common inheritance. By challenging and upending our current economic and social power arrangements, we create the opportunity to build a world where every child can sit and wonder with curiosity at the universe, without being distracted by structural oppression.

Note

- 1 Throughout this text, I will use “physics” as a shorthand that encompasses both physics and astronomy, which are deeply interrelated disciplines (and arguably not actually separate disciplines).

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INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST DATA VISUALIZATION

Precepts and practices

Roopika Risam

In 1987, Barbara Christian responded to the emergence of “theory” in the academy with a critique of its tendency to erase Black feminist thought (Christian 1987). She articulated how a shift in academic discourse was being wielded to the exclusion of women of color, denying their agency as producers of knowledge. The changing methods in humanistic inquiry redefined what “theory” meant to position them outside of trends in academic knowledge production. As I noted in my article, “Beyond the Margins: Intersectionality in Digital Humanities,” the early decades of digital humanities scholarship effected similar moves by defining the field in ways intended to exclude women of color and Indigenous women—both as participants in the field itself and in representation within the content of digital humanities projects (Risam 2015). Just as Christian argued that “people of color have always theorized” (Christian 1987, 52), I suggested that there is a vivid history of participation in digital humanities scholarship (Risam 2015). However, the drawing of boundaries around what constituted “digital humanities” became a method of exclusion—just as it did for “theory.” In the contemporary academy, we are witnessing the emergence of yet another form of academic practice that does the same: data visualization. Taking up the question of what intersectional feminist data visualization looks like, in this chapter, I situate the stakes of intersectional feminist data visualization, discuss why it is critical now, and offer five precepts for undertaking it to more fully realize the power of data visualization for multiply minoritized communities.

Unlike theory and digital humanities, with their specialized language that is challenging to those who are not steeped in academic discourse, data visualization is unique in its producers and audiences. Data visualization is a method that crosses over between academy and industry, between scholar and practitioner, between professional and amateur. The broad appeal of volumes like Isabel Meirelles’ *Design for Information* (2013), Alberto Cairo’s *How Charts Lie* (2019), and Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein’s *Data Feminism* (2020) speaks to both the popularity and visual power of data visualization as a form of storytelling. Despite increasing enthusiasm for data visualization and the range of participants who engage with it, as with both “theory” and “digital humanities,” its full potential is limited by exclusion of Indigenous women and women of color from participation and discourse, as well as our exclusion within the content of data visualization.

Perhaps unsurprisingly the demographics of those who engage with data visualization attest to underrepresentation by women of color, Indigenous women, and gender minorities of

color. The Data Visualization Society's (DVS) 2021 State of the Industry Survey¹ demographics reported 43.1 percent of participants as women and 1 percent preferring to self-describe their gender (i.e., not selecting the binary options of "man" or "woman"), while 16.2 percent indicated that they were from an "underrepresented racial or ethnic group" (Data Visualization Society 2021a). The report from the survey did not look at the intersectional dimensions of the data, but my own analysis of their data set shows that 7 percent of respondents selected both "woman" and "underrepresented racial or ethnic group," while 0.28 percent selected both "self-described" gender and "underrepresented racial or ethnic group" (Data Visualization Society 2021b). This data suggests that there is a way to go in both outreach and access to data visualization for Indigenous, women of color, and gender minorities.²

The absence of women of color and Indigenous women as categories of analysis in the DVS State of the Industry Report is but one example of our exclusion from content. Although authors such as Meirelles, Cairo, D'Ignazio, and Klein clearly articulate the rhetorical nature of data visualization, within both the academy and industry (and the spaces in between) the method is approached through lenses of neutrality and objectivity: data is neutral and therefore data visualization is an objective representation of information. In practice, it is anything but.

The data sets on which we rely to undertake data visualization are constructed through an array of subjective forces: who is collecting the data? For what purposes? What kinds of questions are being asked? What controlled vocabularies or schemas are being used to articulate the terms of data collection? Who determines what those questions and terms are? And what biases are shaping their decision-making processes? (Risam 2019). One key issue that can either inhibit or enhance the utility of such data for intersectional analysis is aggregation or disaggregation. Aggregate data is compiled and offers, at a high-level, a broad summary of collected data. Disaggregated data, on the other hand, is broken down into smaller units, facilitating more granular forms of analysis. Aggregate and disaggregated data can be used for any number of reasons and neither is inherently better from the perspective of intersectional analysis, though disaggregated data can bring to light issues of equity that aggregate data can hide (Holland and Palaniappan 2012; Nguyen and Teranishi 2020; Kauh et al. 2021). However, in some cases, such as where the number of people of color or Indigenous people in a data set is small, disaggregation coupled with the variable of gender may bear risks of making those individuals personally identifiable (Chen et al. 2011; Seastrom 2017; Randall et al. 2021). Therefore, the use of aggregate or disaggregated data is a context-dependent decision that balances the need for fine-grained data for an intersectional feminist approach to data against the safety and security of those whose data was collected.

In the case of the DVS survey, for example, the decision to track "underrepresented racial or ethnic groups" aggregates data from all who self-select into that category and thus forecloses disaggregation of the data *by* racial or ethnic group. While we can extract numbers of respondents that selected both "underrepresented racial or ethnic group" and "woman" or "self-described," we cannot drill down deeper into the nuances of inequalities. No definition of "underrepresented" is provided, so it is unclear which percentage of the total includes Asians—who tend to be better represented in technology than Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people. The context of such underrepresentation is also unclear. Underrepresented in the technology sector? Underrepresented in their national context? The decisions about data collection that produce such lack of clarity hamper the utility of the data for understanding the disparities that an intersectional approach to analyzing the data would facilitate. Conversely, a question that defined a context (e.g., "People of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx descent are underrepresented in technological fields. Are you part of one of these underrepresented racial or ethnic groups? Which one(s)?" or "Do you belong to a racial or ethnic group that is underrepresented in your country

of residence?") would produce demographic data that would be more useful for understanding the scope of exclusion with greater specificity. There is little risk that such a change that would compromise the safety of respondents for a membership survey of a volunteer organization with members across the world, most of whom are largely unknown to each other.

In contrast, a similar survey within a workplace with low numbers of underrepresented minorities that disaggregated data by racial and ethnic group or, more granularly, by racial and ethnic group *and* gender might make responses by people in individual or overlapping demographic categories personally identifiable. By way of example, my previous university's own campus climate survey, last conducted in 2018, asked such granular demographic questions (about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, job role, and academic unit). Coupled with our demographic profile at that time, in which 92 percent of our faculty members were white, I and my faculty of color colleagues felt unduly exposed by the identifiability of our individual responses while specifically being asked about our experiences of racism, misogyny, and other forms of discrimination on campus. In this case, aggregation of data would have identified the issues at the university without compromising us through personally identifiable data.

Beyond the data sets, data visualizations themselves are representations of the data and are similarly shaped by subjective forces through the decision-making of their creators. Consciously or unconsciously, they make choices in the design process that affect the insights that users glean from viewing them. These include: which of the data are being sampled, sliced, and presented? Which stories are being excavated from the data set and which remain hidden? How does the selection of a visualization format (e.g., a map, chart, graph) correspond or conflict with the story being told? How are these decisions being made? (Segel and Heer 2010; Lee et al. 2015; Kennedy et al. 2016; Risam 2019) In the case of the DVS survey report, the decision to *not* include a visualization (or any discussion) of how many participants identified as both "under-represented" and as women or gender minorities is a prime example of how data visualization is subject to biases that determine which narratives are worth being brought to light from a data set and which are not.

Neither data nor data visualizations are neutral or objective; rather they are embodied representations of the lived experience of people in all their complexities, including race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and other axes of identity that confer or withhold privilege. The implications of the erasures in both the data and the data visualizations are key examples of how data visualization follows in the footsteps of both theory and digital humanities in its elision of women of color and Indigenous women. The dynamic that Christian identified is, once again, being reproduced and—through the widespread popularity of data visualization as a method—being amplified. In the case of racialized and gendered disparities among participants in DVS, failing to ask the right questions about *who* is present in turn leads to not having the right data we would need to be able to *recognize* their absence, let alone to identify how to address it.

35.1 Why intersectional data visualization now?

With data rapidly becoming a form of capital and data visualization a method through which capital is multiplied, identifying the ways that data visualization can omit the perspectives of those who experience compounded harm at the intersections of systematically minoritized identities—and identifying practices that can change this—is essential. In our current data-rich environments, "data" has become an increasingly valuable commodity and data visualization is the tool for operationalizing it. Several factors have led to increased engagement by the range of participants in data visualization: 1) portable data formats, such as the comma-separated values (CSV) or JavaScript Object Notation (JSON) formats, make data readily available for

analysis with computational tools; 2) the development of out-of-the-box computational tools like Tableau or Flourish have put the power of data visualization into the hands of a wide range of users and do not require knowledge of coding; and 3) governmental organizations and NGOs are making their data sets on a range of topics, from COVID-19 to migration to crime, available for ready use with these data visualization tools, while the open data movement has given rise to open data repositories, such as figshare and Zenodo.

Being able to control data and manipulate it through data visualization offers access to control over the means of production of knowledge. But such control is increasingly out of our reach. Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias use the term “data colonialism” to argue that human life today is “colonized by data” through corporations that operate in a colonial mode in which “human experience, potentially every layer and aspect of it, is becoming the target of profitable extraction” (Couldry and Mejias 2019, x). They propose:

If historical colonialism annexed territories, their resources, and the bodies that worked on them, data colonialism’s power grab is both simpler and deeper: the capture and control of *human life* itself through appropriating the data that can be extracted from it.

(Couldry and Mejias 2019, xi)

Putting aside the fact that colonialism is not merely “historical” but ongoing and that profitable extraction of human experience (e.g., enslavement and dispossession) is a consistent feature of colonialism in all of its incarnations, their analysis identifies a clear relationship between data extraction and monetization today. While Couldry and Mejias focus primarily on the role of corporations such as Facebook (Meta) in the colonial appropriation of data, we cannot ignore how the availability of data sets and analytical tools are restructuring both scholarly and lay forms of knowledge generation. For example, “data science” programs are proliferating at universities in the US and around the world, while organizations like DVS bring together communities of practitioners that cut across boundaries between academy, industry, and leisure.

Whether through academic or non-academic approaches to data visualization, the ability to extract and control data confers power to shape the foregoing narratives of our time. Like Christian’s “New Philosophers,” who are “eager to understand a world that is today fast escaping their political control,” (Christian 1987, 67), data visualization has become a new area to conquer. The mechanistic viewpoint conveyed through such visualizations resembles Christian’s concern with the ways that theory privileged “mechanical analyses of language, graphs, and algebraic equations; its gross generalizations of culture” (Christian 1987, 69). In the context of digital humanities, I argued that the emphasis on computational analysis had the same result (Risam 2015). Data visualizations offer the possibility of presenting large, complex stores of information in simplified ways, seen for example in the increasing use of data visualization by journalists (Bradshaw 2015; Coddington 2015; Gray et al. 2012; Mair and Keeble 2014; Young et al. 2018; de-Lima-Santos 2022). However, what is often lost in the race for data visualization—the drive to build flashy, eye-catching visual representations of data that generate pageviews, clicks, and circulation through social media—is that most audiences lack digital, data, and graphical literacies (Shah and Hoeffner 2002; Mandinach and Gummer 2012; Muñoz-Rodríguez et al. 2020; Braund 2021). In the absence of these literacies, data visualizations present themselves as objective, neutral depictions of facts in a data set, rather than representations that advance particular arguments.³

This results from the fact that most viewers do not understand that data is, in essence, an abstraction that reduces and flattens the embodied dimensions of human experience. This flattened data is in turn mediated by tools that, as critics like Safiya Umoja Noble, Ruha Benjamin,

and Simone Brown suggest, themselves bear traces of the embedded biases of their creators while presenting as neutral (Noble 2018; Benjamin 2021; Browne 2015). Therefore, they impose an additional layer of flattening onto data that has already been positioned as disembodied in the translation of embodied experience into machine-readable characters. However, as the effects of aggregation and disaggregation demonstrate, those who are in the position to make decisions about how to collect and visualize data are in the position to open up (or delimit) the impact that data visualization can have when telling (or omitting) the stories of people and communities who experience compounded harm at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities.

We have seen this throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in the proliferation of data visualizations and dashboards drawn on data about case counts, hospitalizations, and deaths. These dashboards are often limited in the data they represent, as well as in their utility by users. As Jacqueline Wernimont proposes, they are “vital, yet flawed” (Wernimont 2021a). This is a factor of their data, design, and access constrained by digital divides (Wernimont 2021b). By way of example, in this simple line graph aired on Fox News in 2020, we see an example of the ways that data visualizations and the arguments they make are factors of design choices made by creators (see Figure 35.1).⁴ A simple line graph displays a single plotted line created by the relationship between two axes. By convention, independent variables lie on the x-axis while dependent variables are plotted on the y-axis. Representing numbers of COVID-19 cases over time, dates appear on the x-axis, while case counts are measured on the y-axis. A viewer should, theoretically, be able to follow the dates from left-to-right on the x-axis and accurately track the rise and fall of case counts over time. Seems simple? Not quite. The scale on the y-axis is completely random. Sometimes the case count increases by 30, sometimes by ten, sometimes 50. This affects the representation of case counts on the graph and, in turn, the viewer’s ability to accurately assess relative increases and decreases. The graph would look substantially different if the y-axis was normalized to consistent intervals or by a logarithmic function. The normalized y-axis would indicate that the virus was spreading more rapidly than it appears.

While this is a basic problem that results from the combination of manipulative data visualization and varying levels of graphical literacy among viewers, there are other ways that



Figure 35.1 New COVID-19 cases per day, March 2020.

COVID-19 data visualizations have failed to shed light on the nuances of the pandemic—particularly its lived realities. These visualizations obscure the nuances of the human toll of the pandemic by offering the impression that the pandemic and its effects are uniformly distributed throughout the population, regardless of race, gender, class, disability, and the convergence of these axes of identity. Michael Simeone, Gracie Valdez, and Shawn Walker argue, for example, that they often fail to communicate that death rates are higher among minoritized and low-income communities as well as race and ethnicity (Simeone et al. 2021).

The data used to visualize the COVID-19 pandemic points towards the precise challenges that led Kimberlé Crenshaw to coin the term “intersectionality.” Data visualizations that treat race and gender as distinct variables fail to address the compounded harm of race and gender, along with the effects of other axes such as class and disability, which have implications for public health and clear relationships to which communities and groups of people bear the brunt of the pandemic. Indeed, data indicates there was a disproportionate racial impact of the pandemic (Urban Institute n.d.; Tai et al. 2021; Hill and Artiga 2022). The unequally distributed nature of the pandemic also has cascading effects, such as in the disproportionate numbers of Black, Latinx, and Indigenous children orphaned by the pandemic, in comparison to white and Asian children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021).

An intersectional perspective on such data offers a more complex picture. At first glance, data that examines gender suggests that more men and women around the world have died from the COVID-19 pandemic (Jin et al. 2021; Danielsen et al. 2021). However, a study from the GenderSci Lab, which promotes intersectional study of gender in the sciences, found that Black women’s death rates were at least three times as high as those of white and Asian men (Rushovich et al. 2021). As the researchers note, “Without looking at the intersections between gender and race, the blanket claim that women with COVID-19 fare better than men makes invisible the high death rate among Black women” (qtd. in “Sex Disparities” 2021). As Rushovich et al. note, “[Socially relevant variables] are fundamental to multi-dimensional analyses that can illuminate the patterns of inequity we uncovered within and across race and sex categories” (1700). The implications of these findings are important for understanding the relationship between race and health. Initial findings on gender disparities in COVID-19 deaths led some researchers to conclude that there may be a biological reason for the gender disparity. However, analyses that incorporated race *and* gender challenge a claim to biological determinism and, instead, present a more complicated picture where we must, instead, consider the relationship between race, gender, and class to poverty, access to healthcare, and living conditions.

The consequences of this approach to data and visualization tools are the erasure of human beings behind the data—both the collectors and those represented in the data. In the case of COVID-19 data, the complex inequities of human life, born from the compounded harm of race, class, gender, and other axes of identity that confer relative levels of privilege and oppression, are flattened. To be clear, this is not simply about the production of knowledge but also the material consequences of the knowledge that is produced. This is not simply a matter of representation of data but about how representation (or lack thereof) translates into the visibility of vulnerable people. This begs the question of what kinds of practices are needed to facilitate intersectional feminist data visualization.

35.2 Intersectional feminist data visualization in practice

What would it take to be able to use data and create data visualizations to tell stories that do not elide these perspectives? Put another way, what does an intersectional feminist approach to data visualization look like? Surveying the landscape of principles that have been articulated at the

nexus of feminism and data visualization, I add five precepts intended to more fully realize the promise of intersectional feminist data visualization: No Data Visualization without Sovereignty, No Data Visualization without Redistribution, No Data Visualization without Care and Repair, No Data Visualization without Representation, and No Data Visualization without Graphical Literacy.

There have been several approaches to this question proposed in academic scholarship—largely advanced by white women. For example, Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein define “data feminism” as “a way of thinking about data, both their uses and their limits, that is informed by direct experience, by a commitment to action, and by intersectional feminist thought ... the work of data feminism is first tune into how standard practices in data science serve to reinforce existing inequalities and second to use data science to challenge and change the distribution of power” (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020a, 8–9). After disclosing their identities as heterosexual, cisgender, middle-class white women, they propose to “describe a form of intersectional feminism that takes the inequities of the present moment as its starting point and begins its own work by asking: How can we use data to remake the world?” (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020a, 5). In a follow-up essay, noting that the “present moment” captured in *Data Feminism* (2020) could not possibly account for the COVID-19 pandemic, they expand their principles: examine power (analyze how power operates), challenge power (confront unequal power structures and work towards justice), elevate emotion and embodiment (value multiple forms of knowledge including embodied knowledge), rethink binaries and hierarchies (challenge gender binaries and classification systems), embrace pluralism (synthesize knowledge from multiple perspectives), consider context (data is not neutral or objective), and make labor visible (data science is collaborative) (D’Ignazio and Klein 2020b).

Another important intervention is Caroline Sindere’s *Feminist Data Set*, a “process-driven art project” that is working to embed intersectional feminism into artificial intelligence (Sindere n.d., 4). In Sindere’s words, “Feminist Data Set imagines data creation, as well as data sets and archiving, as an act of protest” (Sindere n.d., 4). The process of *Feminist Data Set* is as follows:

- 1) data collection, 2) data structuring and data training, 3) creating the data model, 4) designing a specific algorithm to interpret data, 5) questioning whether a new algorithm needs to be created to be “feminist” in its interpretation or understanding of the data and the models, 6) prototyping the interface, [and] 7) refining.

(Sindere n.d., 9)

An exception to the dominance of white women in intersectional feminist approaches to data is the work of the qCollaborative, which undertakes design research with the goal of “challenging and changing unjust behaviors such as racism, colonialism, (cis)sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism [sic], classism, and xenophobia wherever they occur, including in academia, in social justice movements and in ourselves” (qCollaborative n.d.). The collective focuses on research in feminist placemaking, materializing the digital, remediating experience, and designing for social justice (qCollaborative n.d.). They argue that intersectional feminist data materialization can be undertaken by “forcing connections between the digital and the material, and dwelling with embodied data in research scenes” (Wiens et al. 2020, 16).

To these key insights, I would add the following precepts for intersectional feminist data visualization, which intervene in the gaps in existing formulations. These precepts are designed to recognize that data visualization takes place beyond academic discourse and data science and can meaningfully bridge between the broad range of participants. They are intended to center

the communities most likely to have their needs hidden or otherwise misrepresented through data visualization, as well as promote multi-directional flows of knowledge between those who visualize data and those whose data is being visualized, with the aim of narrowing that gap and putting production in the hands of vulnerable communities.

35.2.1 No Data Visualization without Sovereignty

Decision-making about data visualization must, unequivocally, be framed through sovereignty for the communities whose data is being represented. The concept of “data sovereignty” promoted by Indigenous communities and nations, particularly the CARE principles, provides a crucial framework: Collective benefit, Authority to control, Responsibility, and Ethics (Carroll et al. 2020). Carroll et al. suggest that the CARE Principles be centered along with the FAIR Guiding Principles that offer advice on data management and stewardship: Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable (Carroll et al. 2020). Facilitating intersectional feminist data visualization requires ensuring that the work undertaken is done for the collective benefit of those who experience compounded harm due to the confluence of their identities and with responsibility and accountability to them. The ethical imperative is to work *with* these communities to ensure that their agency is prioritized.

35.2.2 No Data Visualization without Redistribution

In light of the extractive practices that data can engender, taking a redistributive, rather than an extractive approach to data visualization is critical. A redistributive approach is one that puts outreach and collaboration at its heart, with the goal of sharing knowledge and skills. It requires the recognition and promotion of the fact that minoritized communities inherently possess both knowledge and expertise about their own experiences. This knowledge and expertise must, in turn, be welcomed through authentic and equitable collaboration. Such a redistributive approach requires academics, in particular, to avoid being seduced by what Sandy Grande calls the “inducements” of the university: the accolades, credit, and professional benefits that research brings (Grande 2018). Those whose engagement in visualization in other contexts, whether professional or recreational, must similarly resist the influence of their own potential gains over the needs of the communities. The primary benefit of the data visualization should lie in the community: in their well-being, their expertise, their lived experience, and their stories.

35.2.3 No Data Visualization without Care and Repair

Data-driven approaches within and beyond the academy have caused harm to minoritized communities more generally and compounded the harm for multiply marginalized group and individuals. Therefore, the imperative of intersectional feminist data visualization is to promote care and repair: methods that demonstrate attentiveness to the needs of these communities and seek to repair the harm done. This requires the building of relationships with those whose data forms the basis of visualizations and thus challenging the paradigm of knowledge production in which knowledge is produced *on* them, rather than *with* or *by* them. Doing the work of intersectional feminist visualization must necessarily be collaborative and, in the context of collaboration, should put the tools of data visualization into the hands of the individuals in these communities. This equips them with the power to tell their own stories with their own data, promoting their agency. It further requires humility on the behalf of practitioners to recognize that possessing the expertise in data visualization methods does not supersede the expertise of

those without. As such, intersectionalist feminist data visualization demands recognition of that expertise as a form of repair.

35.2.4 No Data Visualization without Representation

At the most basic level of data collection, ensuring that representation of racial and ethnic groups, genders, and other demographic data are being collected is crucial to making intersectional feminist data visualization possible. Otherwise, the limitations of data will inevitably become the limitations of data visualization. This requires attention to data aggregation and disaggregation with harm-reduction in mind: assessing the population to be surveyed, identifying the research questions that guide data collection, and determining the maximum level of data disaggregation that will maintain safety and limit personally identifiable information. Grounding this approach in the need for sovereignty above further suggests the importance of including the voices of those who will be affected by the data and visualizations in the decision-making processes.

35.2.5 No Data Visualization without Graphical Literacy

Recognizing that gaps in digital, data and, especially, graphical literacy is a challenge to viewership, intervening in that is crucial. In this regard, intersectional feminist data visualization requires active work to promote development of these literacies. This requires conscious effort in the design of visualizations: providing text and legends that assist viewers in developing these skills, offering a critical apparatus that explains design decision-making and how that affects interpretation, and developing pedagogical materials to assist educators with using the visualizations to enhance their students' literacies. Doing so also assists with ensuring that data visualization is redistributive at heart.

At a time when data visualization possesses the power to shape audiences' understanding of the world around us, intersectional feminist approaches to data visualization are crucial to fully realizing the power of data to empower multiply minoritized communities. Those with these skills have a responsibility for sharing them, promoting graphical literacy, and for undertaking collaborative work that empowers individuals and groups who have been underrepresented both in content and among practitioners. The power of data and the stories it can tell must be redistributed—and a truly intersectional approach to data visualization holds the possibility of doing so.

Notes

- 1 “Industry” is a misnomer here as DVS participants include those in data visualization jobs, journalists, professors and teachers, freelancers, and hobbyists; they may not strictly be part of an “industry.”
- 2 From 2019 to 2021, I served as co-chair of the Diversity Committee for DVS. In response to recommendations from the Diversity Committee, the society made great strides towards shifting from an all-white board and predominantly white staff towards increased racial and ethnic diversity, including women of color—but not Indigenous participants. This is a crucial first step towards greater participation by women of color and ensuring we have access to the storytelling power of data visualization, though more work remains to be done.
- 3 As I have argued in the context of data visualizations of migration, data visualizations affect how viewers interpret the issues they represent. For example, the visualization techniques and design choices most frequently used to visualize the influx of forced migrants to Europe from 2015 to 2019 encode the message that asylum seekers and refugees are a problem, their very presence threatening the security, economy, and national identity of countries in Europe (Risam 2019). This is just one vulnerable

population that falls victim to the fallacy of data visualization—that it is merely a neutral technological tool that one applies to a data set to produce and empirical result.

- 4 This is but one example of a widespread trend of bad COVID-19 visualizations that have spawned countless viral tweets, articles, and Reddit threads.

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36

INTERSECTIONALITY AND ITS LIMITS

Quantitative public health and the epidemiology of sexually transmitted infections

Mairead Sullivan

On April 23, 2010, The CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* presented recent findings from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) documenting the prevalence of herpes infection, both oral and genital, in the US population (CDC 2010). The report notes that genital herpes incidence in the "general population" had fallen over 30-plus years of surveillance, from positive testing in 21% of the population, in studies that captured years 1988–1994, to a current prevalence of just over 16% in 2010. The report then breaks this population prevalence down by race-based demographics, noting that the prevalence rate for white, non-Hispanic Americans is roughly 12% while that of Black, non-Hispanic Americans is more than triple that, at 39.2%, with Black, non-Hispanic women recording the highest prevalence at 49%.¹ According to the CDC, 49% of Black, non-Hispanic women have been exposed to the virus—that is, have produced antibodies to the virus, with or without disease expression—that causes genital herpes. The report of such disproportionate rates of genital herpes infection between Black women and non-Black women was soon splashed across the media. Almost as swiftly, Black community leaders and health advocates pushed back. *The Root*, an online news magazine dedicated to "Black news, opinions, politics, and culture," ran a series of articles questioning the CDC report, specifically their sampling strategy that tested less than 1,000 Black women in order to make broad claims about the HSV risk basis for all Black, non-Hispanic women in the United States (Crute 2010).

I open with this story about the CDC's vexed report because it helpfully highlights the limits of intersectionality in quantitative public health research, especially when, as is often the case, intersectionality, as a term, stands in for naming demographic differences. Since the 1990s, public health, like many fields, has increasingly heralded intersectionality as a guiding principle and gold standard theory (Bowleg 2021). The emphasis on intersectional analysis, however, has been largely driven by qualitative research agendas. Only in the last few years has intersectionality become a demand in quantitative research (Phillips et al. 2020; Mena et al. 2019). The challenge here is that quantitative research necessarily requires discreet categorization. Since quantitative research's emphasis is on the quantifiable, that is the measurable, social difference must be operationalized through the use of discreet categories. Operationalized means turning concepts, like social difference or sexually transmitted infection risk, into measurable categories. Often,

researchers rely on demographic categories, specifically race, gender, and sexual orientation, to operationalize the effects of social systems on health disparities. In other words, quantitative public health research relies on broad labels, such as race, gender, and sexuality, to demarcate kinds of people, usually through categories within these broad labels, such as man/woman or gay/straight. This emphasis on measurable categorization is distinct from qualitative public health research that might take, for example, community narratives as its site for understanding differential experiences of health outcomes and health access.

The CDC's report on genital herpes prevalence, as well as the media maelstrom and community push back that followed, highlights the challenges of using demographic categories to understand rates and risks of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), especially in community groups. The study stands out because herpes carries with it such intense social stigma. But, even more so, the study stands out for the methods that were used to determine prevalence rates. Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV), often demarcated as oral (HSV-1) or genital (HSV-2), is a virus in the family of chicken pox. Like many other viruses, a person can be exposed to HSV, their body can mount an immune response, and they may never experience the symptoms associated with HSV infection. For others, much like chicken pox, infection with the virus can result in open sores in the oral or urogenital area. For some, symptoms of infection can be recurrent. For others, they may experience only a few outbreaks that abate over time. Serotesting measures the body's immune response to the virus but tells us little about the clinical manifestations of the disease. Drawing from the same NHANES study, the CDC notes that a huge majority, nearly 80%, of adults who have been infected with HSV have never shown symptoms and had never received a clinical diagnosis of herpes (CDC 2010). Noting that the stigma of the disease is a greater burden than infection, especially for those whose infection is asymptomatic, the CDC recommends against serotesting (testing blood for signs of infection) in individuals who do not have clinically significant symptoms or who are not members of high-risk populations. And, yet, it is precisely this form of testing, testing blood in the absence of symptoms, that the NHANES study used to determine HSV prevalence. In other words, despite recommending against routine serotesting in the general population, precisely because such testing is likely to find very high rates of HSV infection even without clinical symptoms, the NHANES study used serotesting to determine HSV prevalence in its sample groups.

In this short essay, I use the epidemiology of sexually transmitted infections, specifically HSV, and the process by which researchers choose discreet variables to understand disease dispersion and risk, to explore the limits and potentials of intersectionality in quantitative public health research. The epidemiology of sexually transmitted infections provides ample examples of the limits of intersectionality, especially when, as is often the case, intersectionality comes to mean, simply, demographic categories. I begin with a brief overview of the field of public health and its primary quantitative sub-field, epidemiology. I explore current debates within the field of the uses and usefulness of intersectionality as a guiding framework for sexually transmitted disease epidemiology. I then offer some valuable models for understanding intersectional analysis in public health as well as some potential limits to this commitment. I conclude by considering how researchers and activists might translate public health scholar Melissa Creary's framework of "bounded justice" to the epidemiology of sexually transmitted infections.

36.1 Public health and epidemiology

Public health, as a field, is concerned primarily with the transmission, conditions, and prevalence of disease in specific populations. In this way, public health is related to medicine but pivots from the individual and the biological body to communities and social contexts. Put simply,

if medicine is about treating disease, public health, as a field, is invested in preventing disease and ameliorating health disparities. Public health research typically focuses on health outcomes, health disparities, and barriers to health in specific populations. Researchers define populations through several demarcating boundaries, including geographic borders, citizens of nation-states, members of identity groups, or, even, in especially targeted studies, people who visited the same restaurant on a particular day. So, for example, if one is trying to understand smoking rates in the United States, all people living within the United States are included in the population. Whereas if researchers are trying to understand barriers to quitting smoking, then smokers would be the population under consideration. Thus, populations are determined by the specific disease trajectory or health outcome that researchers are targeting. Public health researchers, however, also recognize that social communities tend to share health outcomes. In order to work at the macro level, that is at the level of populations rather than individuals, public health researchers tend to aggregate people into categories that represent social communities.

Epidemiology is the study of the distributions and determinants of both health and disease in specific populations. Whereas epidemiology is often used to look back and understand how a disease moved through a population, it can also be used to identify groups and populations that are at risk for certain diseases. Epidemiology is also used to make policies and recommendations for risk mitigation, disease surveillance, and for how to target health disparities. The NHANES, for example, is a useful tool for epidemiology because it tracks health outcomes and health disparities both across the US population but also across time. In this way, the survey data allows public health researchers and practitioners to both track diseases and disparities in sub-populations, for example in the LGBT community, as well as track changes over time. At this meta-level of analysis, tools like the NHANES can help guide researchers and practitioners to ask more pointed questions about disease and health disparity.

Since at least the early 21st century, researchers have been committed to incorporating the central tenets of intersectionality into the work of public health. This call to integrate the central tenets of intersectional analysis is increasingly vocal in the realm of quantitative public health. For example, a 2021 editorial in *American Journal of Public Health*, the flagship journal in the field of public health, called for a greater attention to intersectionality in quantitative public health research, including epidemiology (Alvidrez et al. 2021). As the editorial notes, despite public health's insistence that intersectionality has provided a novel theory for weaving individual, or micro-level experiences, with macro, or societal level, drivers of health disparities, intersectionality as a research commitment tends to collapse into "documenting that intersectional status is associated with worse health outcomes" (Alvidrez et al. 2021, 96). Notably, herein, "intersectional status" implies an interchangeability with demographic categories. While focus on demographic categories can serve the important work of noting and signaling a researcher's investment in understanding the health effects of systemic racism, sexism, etc., as well as their intersections, such a commitment also risks reifying a biological basis for both social categories and health differences across social categories. Indeed, in many instances, intersectionality stands in for naming experiences of marginalization. Intersectionality is often invoked—think here of "intersectional status"—to describe the experience of marginalization rather than to name a methodological approach to understanding disparities or outcomes that are experienced differently across social categories. Again, in the recent editorial, the authors note: "documentation of health patterns and disparities related to intersectionality is still needed, particularly in understudied populations" (Alvidrez et al. 2021, 96). The bridging of "intersectionality" and "understudied populations" implies that every combination of demographic categories represents a new population. In this way, social identities become additive discreet variables. Whereas the authors are arguing for more attention to the social determinants of health, and specifically

more attention to the social structures of racism, sexism, homophobia, and others, even in their push they fall back on naming intersectionality as an additive approach to forming populations.

36.2 Why STI epidemiology?

At its core, epidemiology is the study of behaviors. These behaviors may be the behaviors of a virus as it replicates or the specific sexual acts that are more likely to lead to the transmission of sexually transmitted infections. As I have outlined above, epidemiology also requires categorization. In order to understand the movement of disease through a population, we must be able to categorize the people within the population. The challenges of intersectionality for quantitative research are myriad. First, demographic categories, again race, gender, and sexuality, tend to stand in for naming processes of marginalization. For example, returning to our opening anecdote, in its reporting on disparities in HSV rates, the CDC noted: “These data reinforce findings from previous research indicating racial disparities are likely perpetuated because of the higher prevalence of infection within African-American communities” (CDC 2010b). In this example, the naming of differential prevalence through race-based categories becomes the indication of racial disparity. The naming of racial difference as indication of disparity results in the CDC identifying certain groups, in this case Black, non-Hispanic women, as at a higher risk for sexually transmitted infection based strictly on claiming the demographic category “Black, non-Hispanic” and in absence of any analysis of behavior or social context. And here we might note that Black, non-Hispanic quickly slips into African American, which sidesteps any acknowledgement or understanding of how Afro-Latinos are impacted by systems of anti-Black racism. A social epidemiological framework that relies on categorization as a proxy for behavior is markedly different from a needs-based public health approach that seeks out members of marginalized communities to assess their needs. Measuring health differences in relation to race-based demographic categories simply names differences amongst pre-established groups. Such measures cannot account for intragroup differences.

Scholars and practitioners have sought to sidestep these limits of demographics as population in sexual health research by creating new categories that name behavior rather than identity. Even this focus on behavior, however, has limits. For example, in the wake of the HIV crisis, researchers and practitioners noted that not all men who were at risk of HIV transmission from sex with other men identified as gay. In order to operationalize, that is to create a discreet category of people, that could capture a specific risk behavior without attaching that behavior to a social identity, researchers created the categories men who have sex with men (MSM) and women who have sex with women (WSW). As Young and Meyer note, “MSM was introduced to reflect the idea that behaviors, not identities, place individuals at risk for HIV infection” (Young and Meyer 2005). A focus on behavior, however, can also eschew commitments to intersectionality. Both categories, MSM and WSW, are used to name a behavior that might benefit from targeted public health interventions but also recognize that not every individual who engages in such behaviors would identify as lesbian or gay. And, yet, precisely because they sidestep identity to focus on behavior—and, in this case, the clumping strategy of “men” and “women” tends to assume some shared identity markers—the categories can often fall short of reflecting their target group. For example, for many years, trans women were included in the public health category of MSM. While more researchers have taken seriously that trans women are not men, the two groups continue to be clumped together, only now named as “MSM and transgender women.” The lumping together of these two experiences, which most often happens in the context of HIV research, relies on the assumption the MSM and transgender women share the same social contexts and engage in similar risk behaviors. What this lumping

fails to address, as scholars note, is the differential access to testing, prevention, and other modes of ameliorating risk that exists between these two groups. Moreover, a focus on differences based on marginalized identity tends to assume negative outcomes without attending to points of resiliency in marginalized communities. For example, Rodrigo Aguayo-Romero's doctoral work noted that "transgender women of color who reported intersecting experiences of transmisogyny, racism, and classism had higher probabilities of being tested for HIV within the last year" (Aguayo-Romero 2021, 102; 2019). Many studies that invoke intersectionality, name health disparities as attached to marginalized social identities to point to wider systems but often fail to ask what strengths or resiliencies social identities might name or confer.

36.3 Discreet categorization and limits of epidemiology

The use of the NHANES survey and the CDC reporting on HSV seroprevalence in the US population provides an excellent example of the limits of categorical clumping in epidemiology of sexually transmitted infections. The NHANES report has traced HSV prevalence since the 1970s. Rates of seropositive HSV in the general population tend to increase with both age and number of sex partners. Across the late 20th century, rates of HSV in the general population were on a steady incline. This increase in HSV transmission maps to shifting social norms wherein people tended to have more sex partners and to continue to be sexually active, or be newly sexually active, with new partners well into middle age and beyond. As sexually transmitted infections go, HSV is relatively benign in its morbidity, though it carries heavy social stigma. Indeed, as the same CDC report notes, most people who would test positive for anti-bodies to HSV, in other words who would have a positive blood test on a random screening, have never had notable symptoms of herpes infection and have never been formally diagnosed with HSV. This is not to say that HSV infection is not both painful and recurrent. Indeed, for people who experience what is often labeled as "symptomatic" HSV, the resulting sores can be both extremely painful and produce and exacerbate sexual stigma. The CDC guidelines note that even people without clinical symptoms may shed the virus, and thus may infect others. Nevertheless, the CDC recommends testing in the general population, in the absence of symptoms.

The NHANES findings on HSV prevalence provides a clear example of how the sampling strategies of population-based epidemiological studies confound commitments to intersectionality as well as risk attributing behavior-based sexual health risk to embodied difference. For NHANES, data is collected every year, but sampling strategy and data reports are done across spans of five years. The NHANES is meant to give a totalizing picture of the health of US citizens. NHANES participants are recruited through a multistage clustered design. Basically, in order to select a representative sample of the United States, researchers must first identify broad differences in the US population and then divide the country according to these differences. For NHANES, all counties in the US are coded within one of 15 categories. Then one county is randomly selected from each category. These 15 counties are then divided into smaller groups, representing a host of demographic differences, and demarcated by geographic borders. From these small groups, every individual household is eligible for selection. Households are selected at random and every member of the household becomes eligible for participation. Individual participants must mark a demographic category, usually drawn from the US census. These small number of participants, usually somewhere between a couple hundred to a couple thousand for each cross category of sex and race (i.e., male, white, non-Hispanic) comes to represent all members of the US population who would be classified in that category.

A sampling strategy that uses a small sub-set of the population to stand in for a whole population make sense, especially for statistical modeling, when the entire population is assumed to

be meaningfully similar. For example, public health scholars have used state cancer registries to study the social support needs of breast cancer survivors (Boehmer et al. 2010). Here, there is a reasonable assumption that all individuals listed in the registry share the similarity of having had breast cancer, usually with even tighter parameters on the stage of cancer and duration and type of treatment. Using a representative sample size, researchers can then begin to map differential needs within the breast cancer community. Sexually transmitted infections, however, present a unique challenge to representative sampling at the kind of scale used by NHANES.

On its face, the NHANES survey can give the appearance of an intersectional analysis because it takes seriously that there are differential health outcomes across demographics. As a first step, identifying differential health experiences can help point researchers in specific directions, both for understanding the root causes of health disparities but also for understanding the effects of differential access to resources or exposure to risk. The CDC's use of the NHANES study to make broad claims about sexual health risks in communities defined solely by race-based demographics, however, stops far short of this kind of intersectional commitment. To be clear, I have not found any claims that the CDC's report provides an intersectional framing. Nevertheless, as I have outlined above, the easy substitution of intersectionality for demographic categories risks both implying a biological basis for difference by race as well as sidestepping an interrogation of the social context of disease prevalence. By attaching racial demographics to HSV prevalence, the report perpetuates an understanding of race as biological and of STI risk as embedded within specific bodies rather than categorized through risk behavior. More importantly, as reporters from *The Root* note, the sampling strategies of the NHANES require two assumptions: one, that members of an identity group can be reasonably assumed to engage in the same risk behaviors and two, that race-based demographics can adequately capture such identity groups (Villarosa 2010).

36.4 Bounded justice and quantitative research

Public health commits itself to the eradication of health disparities and to the guarantee health access for all. Intersectionality is an apt tool for this commitment. And, yet, as I have outlined above, the uptake of intersectionality in quantitative public health research has tended to stagnate at simply naming disparities across social groups. Scholar Melissa Creary's concept of *bounded justice* offers an inroad for thinking with and beyond the challenges of intersectionality in quantitative public health. As Creary outlines: "Bounded justice ... suggests that it is impossible to attend to fairness, entitlement, and equity when the basic social and physical infrastructures underlying them have been eroded by racism and other historically entrenched-isms" (Creary 2021, 241). So, for example, quantitative public health research is often used to argue for more resources to be directed at specific communities. Using statistics, researchers can demonstrate health disparities in hard numbers and these numbers influence the distribution of resources. On its surface, this practice appears justice driven because it addresses health disparities where needs are the greatest. Creary argues, however, that even the most equitable distribution of resources will fail to ameliorate disparity if systems remain the same. Bounded justice, thus, "describes the inherent limitations of even forward-thinking and justice based notions of inclusions" (Creary 2021, 242). Like intersectionality, bounded justice is a concept, an analytic, and a diagnostic tool. Whereas public health research often names intersectionality as a goal, bounded justice demands creative critical thinking that attends to the context of disease. Bounded justice asks what limits a community's flourishing and what are the historically entrenched processes that make such limits appear neutral or natural. This attention to the social context of disease and the policy and processes that contribute to differential outcomes is akin to intersectionality's emphasis on moving beyond the individual

to social systems. Thus, bounded justice builds on intersectionality's commitments. Bounded justice, however, does not start with individuals or even communities or demographic categories. Rather, bounded justice starts with the entrenched histories of racism, sexism, and other isms.

A truly intersectional approach—that is one that engages bounded justice—to the disparate rates of HSV between Black, non-Hispanic communities and other communities would not only ask after what systems or processes might lead to such disparate rates but also what assumptions are built into the research model and what ways this research might biologize social difference by seeming to attribute demographic difference to embodied difference. At a baseline, researchers might question the efficacy of using serotesting to determine HSV prevalence even when such testing is not recommended in the general population. Indeed, as the reports' authors note, 80% of white women who tested seropositive for HSV had never experienced noticeable symptoms and had never received an HSV diagnosis from a clinician (CDC 2010a). For Black, non-Hispanic women, this rate was 90%, meaning that only 10% of Black, non-Hispanic women had received a diagnosis of HSV in a clinical setting versus 20% of white women (CDC 2010a). In this frame, it is white women who have higher rates of infection. Working with clinically significant infection rates, as is done in the general population, might lead researchers to ask different questions about the differences between these two groups. These reported differences demand that we ask after the social context of disease but as a starting point they might usefully engage with broad categorizations. The usefulness here is not in an ascertained truth about the experiences of Black, non-Hispanic women but, rather, these categorical differences help to formulate questions about the use and usefulness of serotesting as well as the meanings and implications of symptomatic and asymptomatic infection.

Moreover, a bounded justice approach would ask after the differential effects that this reporting might have for marginalized communities. In the case of HSV, the emphasis on high rates of seropositive HSV Black, non-Hispanic women has the potential to reproduce unchecked and damaging stereotypes about Black women's sexuality. Additionally, by identifying Black, non-Hispanic women as having such high risk for HSV infection, the report opens doors to increased surveillance of Black women's bodies and sexualities. Like Aguayo-Romero's study of trans women's access to testing resources, an intersectional approach to the NHANES findings would ask after both the conditions and context of disease but also what work the study does in the world and whether that work is guided towards justice.

Any engagement with intersectionality must bridge theory and praxis. As I have outlined herein, in quantitative public health research, an over emphasis on demographic markers as doing intersectional work stalls somewhere between theory and praxis. The challenge for quantitative public health researchers seeking to use the tools of intersectionality is to resist allowing the naming of differential risk—that is, simply documenting the disparities exist in siloed demographic categories—to stand in for the interrogation of social processes that produce and perpetuate differential outcomes. Following Creary and echoing current debates and critiques in quantitative public health research's investment in intersectionality, an intersectional approach demands creative approaches to measuring health disparities and health outcomes even while recognizing the inherent limitations of categorical clumping in the demarcation of discreet populations.

Note

- 1 Across this essay, I use both Black, non-Hispanic and white, non-Hispanic to name the demographic categories used by the CDC. Elsewhere, I use the terms Black and white to name communities and social identities. For more on the challenges of using census data to determine race categories in public health, see: Krieger 2019 and Mays et al. 2003.

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INTERSECTIONALITY AS LIVE THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES

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In the spring of 2021, as we emerged from the deadly winter of 2020, our lab published two seemingly unrelated papers. The first was a relatively straightforward statistical analysis of the relationships between race, sex, and COVID-19 mortality in the US, which we explicitly centered in Black feminist theory and intersectionality (and had a damned hard time getting published). The second was a lengthy theoretical analysis, proposing a counterhypothesis aimed at a set of claims around the decline of “Western” human sperm counts – claims which have been taken up as a banner by white nationalists and men’s rights activists. At first glance, there are few clear-cut connections between these research projects. Yet, we argue that they each offer a complementary model of how to successfully integrate intersectional frameworks into biomedical research.

When we formed the GenderSci Lab in 2018, our aim was to challenge traditional knowledge production modes in the academy, particularly in the sciences. These traditional modes grant greater epistemic authority to certain bodies of knowledge (i.e., STEM fields) and often insist on disciplinary purity. In contrast, our lab, committed to analyzing claims of gender/sex differences in the biomedical sciences, draws together scholars across disciplines who are trained in diverse methodologies. Our experience working in this way has only deepened and affirmed our understanding that there is no possibility of an accurate, critical understanding of gender/sex as an explanatory category within the life sciences without the application of intersectional frameworks. In this essay, we offer an account of intersectionality as live theory and practice in feminist STS and science research, grounded in the GenderSci Lab’s recent experience analyzing COVID-19 mortality and theories of global sperm count decline.

We will not detail the intellectual history of intersectionality; there are excellent chapters in this volume that cover this topic (as do recent texts including Hancock’s *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (2016), Collins’ *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019), and Nash’s *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (2019)). Here, we focus on our experiences conducting research in the life sciences and practicing intersectionality as a guiding epistemological framework, motivating research questions, analytical designs, and publication strategies.

37.1 Case studies in applying intersectionality to biomedical sciences

37.1.1 Sex and race in COVID-19 mortality data

In spring of 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, our lab members were thrown into a virtual environment. Many of us found ourselves frantically grappling with a lack of childcare, or suddenly switching to teaching (or learning) online. We were, like everyone else, hyper-focused on the pandemic.

As demographic data on cases and deaths began to emerge, it became clear that in many places more men than women were dying of COVID-19. Reports of sex disparities were often accompanied by causal claims that attributed them to innate sex differences (Scully et al. 2020). We were struck by the lack of engagement with evidence for pre-existing and widespread gender-linked health differences between and among categories of men and women (Shattuck-Heidorn, Richardson, and Reiches 2020). There was ample, easily accessible evidence that these pre-existing differences could impact disease susceptibility and progression, including evidence from prior coronavirus pandemics demonstrating that apparent sex differences were largely explained by gender-differentials in comorbidities, occupations, and exposures, not biological factors (Bengtsson, Dribe, and Eriksson 2018; Jia et al. 2009; Paskoff and Sattenspiel 2019; Shattuck-Heidorn, Richardson, and Reiches 2020; Yang et al. 2017). Instead of a contextualized analysis of men and women's susceptibility to COVID-19, we watched as efforts to understand the sex disparity in COVID-19 outcomes focused on biologically driven differences between men and women, such as genes on the X and Y chromosomes, gonadal hormones, or deep evolutionary divergences related to immune function and reproduction (Klein et al. 2020; Takahashi et al. 2020).

In order to better understand such claims, we began tracking COVID-19 case and mortality rates by sex in the United States, manually collecting and updating the data on a weekly basis from state-level public health websites (Harvard GenderSci Lab 2020). We contextualized these data and made them publicly available by offering charts and figures examining the findings in relation to population size and age structure. Our results indicated that the apparent sex difference was far from straightforward; the male to female mortality rate ratio varied widely across states and over time. For example, in Texas, the weekly COVID-19 mortality rate was consistently higher among men than among women (in all but one week), while in Connecticut, the weekly COVID mortality rate was higher among women in about half the weeks. In New York, the initial wave of the pandemic had a startlingly high mortality among men (1.56 times as high as women), but then from May onwards this disparity decreased in magnitude, with a sex ratio as low as 1.1 (Harvard GenderSci Lab 2020).

As the pandemic wore on, it also became clear that there were severe disparities across racial groups in the United States that replicated pre-existing health disparities (Bassett, Chen, and Krieger 2020; Chowkwanyun and Reed 2020; Millett et al. 2020). Compared to white Americans, COVID-19 mortality rates were close to four times higher among non-Hispanic Black Americans, and three times higher among Hispanic Americans. Within specific age groups, disparities were even greater, for example, among those aged 35–44, the COVID-19 mortality rate was nine times higher among non-Hispanic Black Americans than non-Hispanic white Americans (Bassett, Chen, and Krieger 2020). Data and theoretical pieces laid out how these racial disparities were not due to innate biological susceptibility, but rather represented the effects of racism at the interpersonal, institutional and structural levels (Pilkington, 2020; Chotiner 2020; Egede and Walker 2020; Krieger 2020). For instance, COVID-19 outcomes were patterned by social and structural factors including racialized and economic segregation, crowded housing, and neighborhood poverty level (Chen and Krieger 2021; Yearby and

Mohapatra 2020). However, no reports examined how mortality varied by sex within race, or how the apparent sex difference in mortality varied across race.

Motivated by the importance of further understanding the clear racial disparities and the apparent sex disparity, we collected all available US state-level data that would allow us to conduct a sex-by-race analysis. We hypothesized that if there is a strong sex-driven biological contributor to the apparent sex disparity, there should be relatively similar sex differences across social groups. Conversely, if the reason for the sex difference is largely due to social factors, we would expect to see variation in the sex difference between social groups. Based on results of previously cited analyses, we expected that Black Americans would have higher COVID-19 mortality than white Americans, but we did not know what analyzing race by sex mortality rates would reveal.

Our results were stark (Figure 37.1) (Rushovich et al. 2021). When COVID-19 deaths were compared across sex and racial group we saw important variation that had been masked in univariate analyses. We found that Black men had much higher mortality rates than any other race or sex group, revealing a particularly vulnerable subgroup. But, contrary to the common story of “men” as uniquely vulnerable, Black women had three to four times the mortality rate of white or Asian/Pacific Islander men. We also found that the sex disparity in mortality varied widely between racial groups. The mortality difference between Black men and Black women was larger than the corresponding disparity among white men and white women, or among Asian/Pacific Islander men and Asian/Pacific Islander women. Additionally, our analysis revealed significant racial disparities within sex. The difference in mortality between Black women and white women was up to 3.8 times greater than the sex disparity between white men and white women.

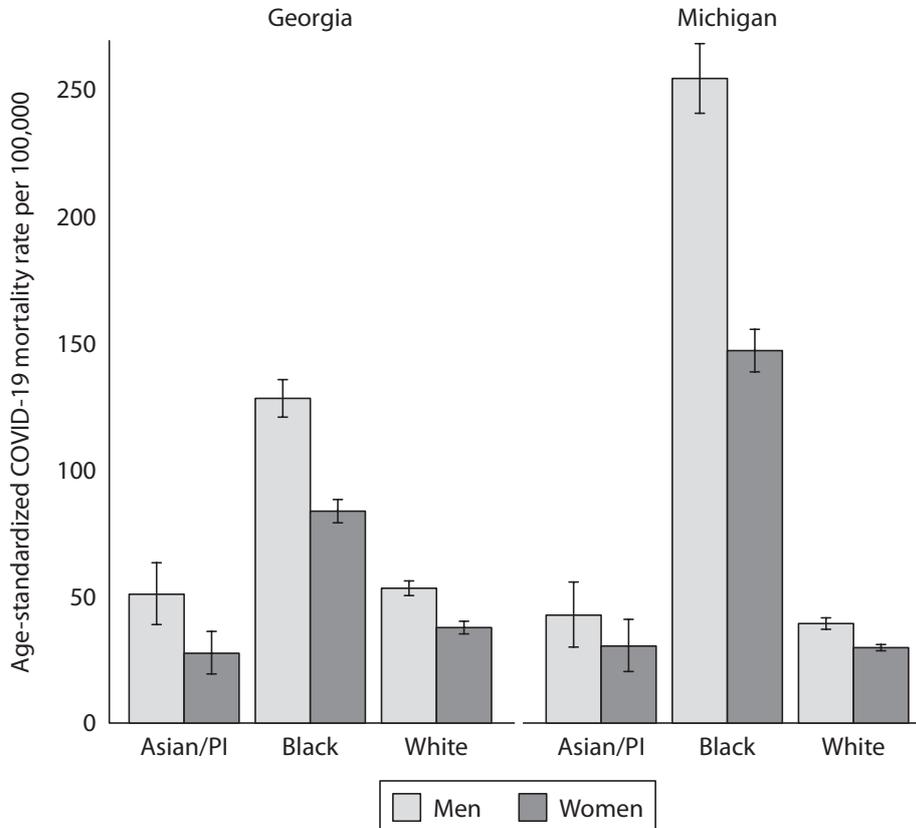


Figure 37.1 Age-standardized COVID-19 mortality rate by race and sex in Georgia and Michigan, USA (March 2020–September 2021).

There is an increasingly rich literature examining how STEM and other primarily quantitative fields can best apply intersectional approaches (Bauer 2014; Bauer and Scheim 2019; Bowleg 2008; Bowleg and Bauer 2016; Else-Quest and Hyde 2016). Largely, this prior work has agreed that STEM fields are well-poised to adopt a variety of statistical methods to analyze how intersecting social identities impact health and biology. However, such quantitative approaches to intersectionality must be embedded within an epistemological stance committed to contextualizing the data within broader societal structures of power and inequality. Given such epistemological commitments, intersectionality can motivate intra- and inter-categorical analysis in the biomedical sciences that uncovers previously hidden disparities.

For us, our commitment to intersectionality in this research is demonstrated through explicit framing of our analysis in Black feminist theory and intersectionality, as well as the contextualization of our results in terms of structural racism and the historical and ongoing oppression of Black communities in America. Our consideration of interacting categories of race and sex demonstrates how univariate analysis can mask important variation, as we uncovered patterns that were not visible when considering either race or sex on their own. However, in agreement with the larger discussion of the practice of intersectionality within the STEM fields cited above, we do not consider the adoption of a multivariate analysis sufficient for the practice of intersectionality. Multivariate analysis alone is unable to address or answer complex questions about the ways that intersecting systems of oppression produce COVID-19 mortality disparities. For us, what makes our analysis an application of intersectional methods is the consideration of societal power dynamics that underlie the patterns we observe, rather than the statistical interactions that we report.

37.1.2 Interrogating scientific assumptions in theories of global sperm count decline

For over 50 years, scientists have been concerned about declining sperm counts. In 2017, these concerns culminated in an extraordinarily high-impact meta-analysis reporting that average sperm counts among “Western” populations has decreased by 50% between 1973 and 2011 (Levine et al. 2017). As a demonstration of the degree of uptake this study received, consider that it is the most cited study ever published by *Human Reproduction Update*, a leading journal in the field of reproductive biology (“Web of Science,” n.d.). Hagai Levine, the study’s lead author, saw these results as a “canary in the coalmine” for male fertility and for “male health across the lifespan” (Levine et al. 2017, 654). In her 2021 book *Count Down*, Shanna Swan, one of the study’s senior authors, compares the implications of the study to dystopian science fiction: “some of what we’ve been thinking of as fiction from stories such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Children of Men*, is rapidly becoming a reality” (Swan and Colino 2021, 8). Public media concurred, with the BBC pronouncing that declining sperm count “could make humans extinct,” and GQ suggesting that “we’re on track ... to void the species entirely” (Ghosh 2017; Halpern 2018).

Claims of uniquely declining sperm among “Western” (white) men have received wide uptake by white supremacist and misogynistic groups, which is a key reason our lab chose to engage with and better understand this work. Relying on claims of declining sperm, these groups argue that the fertility and health of men in whiter “Western” nations are in imminent danger. Often, this danger is explicitly or implicitly linked to a perceived increase in the influence of diverse feminist and anti-racist movements and to longstanding white supremacist fears of white reproductive decline (Ferber 1999; Moore 2002; Moore 2018; Perret 2021).

To understand Levine et al.’s (2017) sperm decline claims, one must understand how they analyzed their data. In their meta-analysis, Levine et al. (2017) divided the world into “Western”

and “Other.” “Western” was defined by the study authors as North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, and “Other” included all remaining countries (see Figure 37.2) (Boulicault et al. 2021). They found among men unselected by fertility status, “Western” men had relatively high sperm counts in the 1970s–1980s (99.0 million/mL, compared to 72.7 million/mL among “Other” men unselected by fertility status).

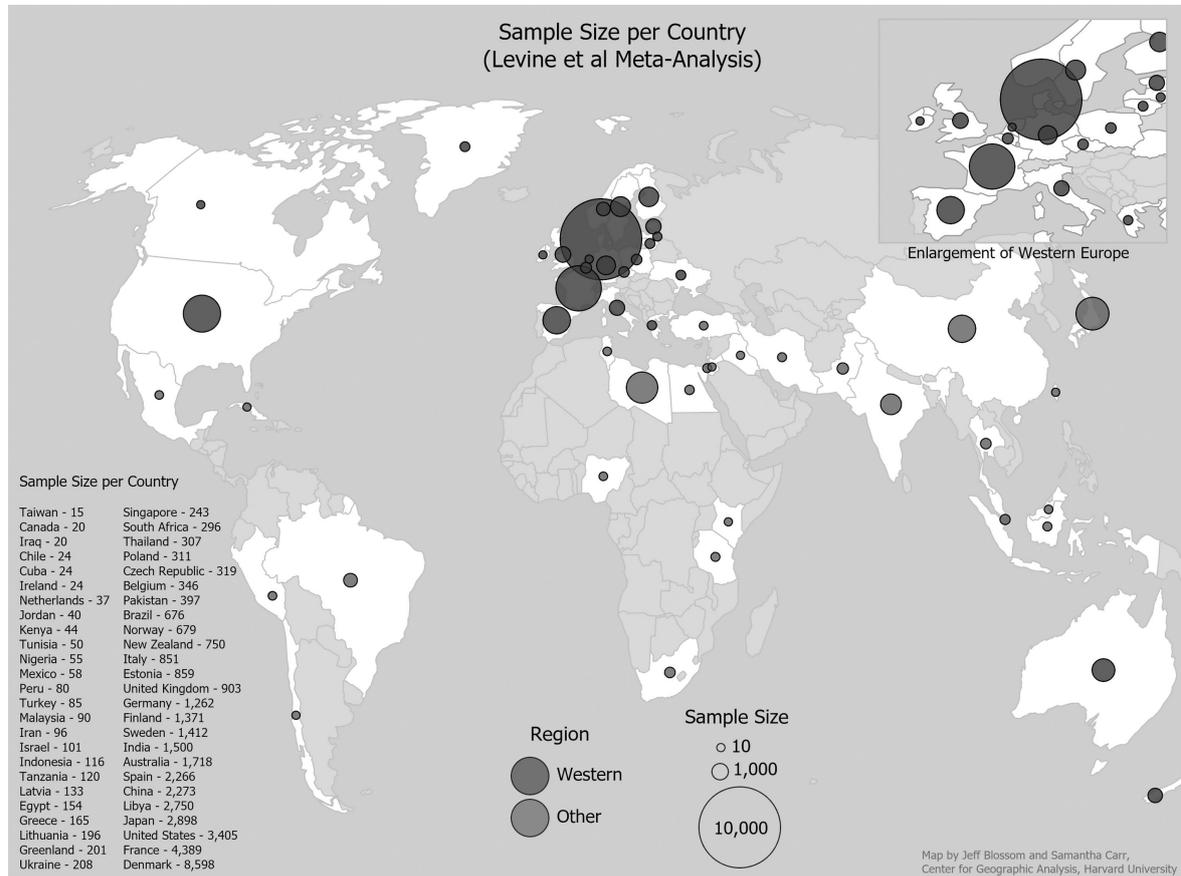


Figure 37.2 Number of sperm samples per country over the period 1973–2011 included in Levine et al. 2017. Source: Boulicault et al. 2021.

As of 2011, average sperm concentration among “Western” men has declined to 47.1 million/mL, while “Other” men’s sperm concentration sits at 62.6 million/mL (see Table 37.1). These data led to Levine et al.’s operative claim that sperm count is declining at an unchecked rate among men categorized as “Western.” (Table 37.1).

Table 37.1 Sperm concentration in the first and last years of the Levine et al. (2017) meta-regression analysis, for all men and by fertility and geographic groups “Western” and “Other”

Category	N	First year	First year sperm count (millions/mL)	Last year	Last year sperm count (millions/mL)
All men	244	1973	92.8	2011	66.4
Unselected Western	110	1973	99.0	2011	47.1
Fertile Western	65	1977	83.8	2009	62.0
Unselected Other	30	1986	72.7	2010	62.6
Fertile Other	39	1978	66.4	2011	75.7

Source: Boulicault et al. 2021.

In our analysis of sperm decline claims, we argue that Levine et al. (2017) use the categories of “Western” and “Other” to implicitly define a sperm count optimum—that of 1970s “Western” men—and treat deviations from this optimum as pathological. Further, the use of these categories assumes that it is warranted to compare bodies across these categories and across time. Yet, due to complex histories of migration between and across the Global South and the Global North, men in 1970s “Western” countries will be very different demographically from the men living in those countries today (Galka 2021). By organizing their data within these categories, the researchers invoke a history of racialized and gendered narratives situating men’s bodies and environments labeled “Western” as an ideal under threat. As such, we argue that this categorization scheme serves as a key site where narratives of declining masculinity and narrative fears of imperiled white supremacy intersect within sperm decline research.

Demonstrating the conceptual, evidential, and ethical failures of the “Western” versus “Other” categorization scheme was not the only aim of our intervention. We also wanted to know if the patterns revealed by Levine et al.’s meta-analysis could be explained—perhaps better explained—without these assumptions. Put another way, how could scientific research on sperm count trends proceed with an awareness of the ways that gendered and racialized assumptions intersect to inform our scientific intuitions, assumptions, and decisions about how to best aggregate, compare, and analyze data?

To this end, we proposed a new hypothesis that we term the “sperm count biovariability hypothesis” as an alternative to Levine et al.’s “sperm count decline hypothesis” (Boulicault et al. 2021). The biovariability hypothesis allows for the possibility that, similar to other measures of reproductive function such as testosterone and progesterone, sperm counts may vary non-pathologically across populations and time. In line with currently available evidence, it begins with the premise that, above a certain threshold, high average population sperm counts are not necessarily optimal, nor are 1970s Western sperm counts a species-typical baseline. A biovariability approach, we argued, invites a wider interpretation of sperm count trends, without ruling out the possibility that sperm counts are declining among certain populations, or that sperm decline in certain contexts may be pathological. In summary, examining the same data and background literature with a different set of assumptions, we argued that the interpretation that population sperm counts vary within a wide optimum and across complex environmental and geographic conditions is at least as plausible as Levine et al.’s interpretation that steady pathological decline is occurring within populations categorized as “Western.”

Compared to our work on COVID-19 and gendered structural racism, here the role of intersectional theory is not as obvious. We offer no original intra- or inter-categorical data analyses, and we do not explicitly call on intersectionality in the article itself. However, in many ways, we find that this piece more deeply sustains some of the key tenets of intersectionality, in particular, commitments to activism and to engaging with power in academic knowledge production and in broader social discourses. By rejecting the implicit assumption that white “Western” men represent the norm, our sperm count biovariability hypothesis offers a framework for more equitable, emancipatory scientific research on men’s reproductive health. It constructs a new approach to global sperm count research that builds some of the central commitments and methods of intersectionality into the underlying scientific research framework.

As we will discuss further below, our work on sperm count decline research also demonstrates how our lab brings multiple perspectives to bear in order to generate critical knowledge that cuts across disciplines, examining societal and scientific power structures from multiple angles. In STEM fields, as in other disciplines, incorporating intersectionality challenges researchers to push beyond what Bilge describes as an “add-and-stir approach of incorporating minority issues as subject matter to extant disciplines in their conventional frames” (Bilge 2014). Practicing

intersectionality as live theory requires forging into the territory of anti-disciplinarity (Chen and Luetz 2020), including deeply questioning extant power structures both in academia and society at large. Aiming to put this into practice, we work to leverage the power available to us to put our research out into the world beyond academia. When we think beyond the work of the specific projects described above, to the broader work of the GenderSci Lab, this working-beyond-disciplinary-silos is a critical aspect of how we see ourselves as engaging robustly with intersectionality within our research practice.

37.2 Forging intersectionality in the STEM fields through sustained interdisciplinarity: the example of the GenderSci Lab

The GenderSci Lab is a collaborative, interdisciplinary lab at Harvard dedicated to generating concepts, methods, and theories for scientific research on sex and gender. In founding our lab, we drew inspiration from feminist collaboratives and research labs, such as the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (“CLEAR,” n.d.), which claim feminism and anti-colonialism as central to their lab practices and research modalities. We see ourselves as part of a longstanding effort to incorporate feminist and other critical frameworks that actively consider societal power dynamics directly into scientific practice. Together with these other scholarly communities, the GenderSci Lab is aiming to fundamentally reimagine how science is conducted.

A home for scholars from a wide range of disciplines, we consider ourselves as both working across disciplinary boundaries and working to dissolve these same boundaries. The GenderSci Lab includes members trained in philosophy, neuroscience, epidemiology, history of science, anthropology, biology, and psychology. This wide range of disciplinary frameworks both informs the research questions we choose and provides diverse methodologies and skill sets with which to analyze and contextualize our findings. Our working model focuses on process and values, and performs an ongoing experiment in modeling a form of STS-science knowledge creation that extends beyond the boundaries of any particular discipline.

When we reflect on our experience as a lab focused on engaging in and developing dialogue with the empirical life sciences, we quickly land on our interdisciplinarity as a central site of praxis. We have described what we do as “practicing together,” perhaps to capture that our work is always in process, always incomplete, always experimental, with many unrealized ideals. Our movement beyond our own disciplines is one of the most generative and dynamic parts of the lab; few of us have elsewhere experienced true, sustained interdisciplinarity. Yet we also find this knowledge-building model to be at odds with the organization of the academy as sharply divided across the natural, social, and humanistic disciplines, producing siloed ways of creating knowledge (Subramaniam 2014).

Our multi/inter/anti-disciplinarity is connected to how we understand ourselves as able to practice intersectionality. As we see it, intersectional analysis in STEM requires a theoretical and conceptual framing for research that is grounded in a commitment to unpacking power-knowledge dynamics. In working across disciplines to bring the insights on societal power structures to bear on gender/sex as it is understood in the biomedical sciences, we often find ourselves theorizing from the ground up to summon the resources to understand a problem in a way that does not present a unidimensional understanding of gender/sex. McKittrick writes of interdisciplinarity as “dislodging our biocentric system of knowledge,” and of the power of thinking with the sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences together (2021). We find that activating such a framework in the context of science engagement work can require reeducating ourselves and our audience every time. For instance, scientific journals or reviewers may not make room for or see the relevance of theory and framing from the

humanities and social science fields in a STEM article. STEM fields may have rigid background assumptions guiding how they interpret biological claims that make it difficult to enter into dialogue or publish within them (Jordan-Young 2010; McFarling 2021).

Sustaining the multi/inter/anti-disciplinary space necessary for our practice of intersectionality requires substantial labor. We work to create a trusting, empathetic, and collaborative environment that is intellectually challenging and inviting for all. It takes time to hear each other's perspectives and, sometimes, to teach each other basic concepts from our respective fields. It takes skills-building, as we acclimate to modes of discourse that involve curiosity and charitable probing of different standpoints and perspectives. These are further ways in which practicing intersectionality is at odds with the organization and structure of the academy. The work goes slower, and as such, it is high risk and not necessarily high reward, by the standard output measures of the academy. However, this work allows us to have far greater insight into the knowledge formations and discourses in which we hope to intervene.

Consider, for instance, how we were able to build cross-disciplinary knowledge to zero-in on the problematic assumptions operating in sperm decline research. Here, we drew from our rich background of disciplinary perspectives to interrogate and re-theorize the categories of "Western" and "Other." Biologically and epidemiologically-trained lab members identified and challenged the assumption that "Western" or "Other" countries represent biologically continuous populations capable of underwriting meaningful comparisons of sperm count across time and place. Lab colleagues from history provided further evidence for this challenge by chronicling the complex migration patterns that have shifted the demographic make-up of "Western" and "Other" since the 1970s. The philosophers among us crafted a conceptual framework for thinking about sperm count data without the use of these problematic categories. Lab members trained in science studies provided context on the eugenic history of "replacement theory" claims and the interface between rightwing social movements and academia. Together, we worked through these diverse arguments, evidence bases, and conceptual frameworks from across disciplines to build our sperm count biovariability hypothesis.

An essential move in our intervention was to demonstrate how the "West"/"Other" categorization scheme was both conceptually and evidentially unwarranted. Levine et al. assume that nations are static, bounded populations, with men residing in those nations "likely to be representative of the general population" (Levine et al. 2017, p. 655). We pointed to complex histories of several types of migration patterns to challenge this assumption and to show how late 20th-century migration continuously and variously redefines the populations of the nations included in Levine's analysis. When sperm count decline researchers assume that the driver of sperm count is the individual's developmental rather than current environment, country of residence is a poor proxy for a sample population, because populations have not stayed within their borders during the study period. The ways in which sperm decline researchers categorized their data in the 2017 meta-analysis thus does not rely on sound biological or epidemiological reasoning, but rather on mostly intuitive distinctions arising from racist and sexist assumptions embedded deep into our cultural fabric. But to reveal and critically analyze this network of assumptions in all of its dimensionality required the distinctive interdisciplinary strengths that we have, across not only epidemiology and reproductive biology but also history and philosophy of science, race, ethnic, gender, and cultural studies, and sociology of science.

While transcending disciplinary boundaries allows us to better triangulate how societal power dynamics affect both human biological variation and the structure of scientific research, working in this manner brings challenges. In our COVID-19 mortality analysis, by anchoring a relatively straightforward, conventional epidemiologic analysis in Black feminist theory and intersectionality, we created a work product that was contrary to the general organization

of the academy and disciplinary publishing silos. Despite the fact that the paper offered well-grounded, original, and crystal clear data analysis for understanding mortality disparities in the pandemic, we ran into significant obstacles publishing the work. Our COVID-19 mortality race and sex paper was ready for publication in July 2020, in critical early days of the pandemic. While publishing it, we worked on an extensive piece with *ProPublica* on the death rates among Black men (Johnson and Martin 2020). Post-publication, our work was cited in major press outlets (Craven 2021; Gonzalez 2021; Padilla 2021). Yet, we were desk-rejected from six medical and public health journals before finding a home at the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* (Rushovich et al. 2021). It is impossible to know why our paper was desk-rejected. However, we believe it's possible that our explicit framing of the analysis in Black feminist theory and intersectionality as well as our discussion of racism and structural inequities was at the root, for at least some journals. We note that three of the six journals were *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* journals. In early 2021, the universe of *JAMA* journals came under fire for inadequate consideration of racism by the editors for, among other things, requesting authors to replace references to racism with "bias" and considering pieces focused on racism and health as "opinion" pieces (McFarling 2021).

The way we practice intersectionality is based on the notion that, for STEM fields in particular, producing knowledge well requires synthesizing partial, situated knowledges across disciplines and identities (Haraway 1988). Here, we have emphasized this critical link between interdisciplinary process and intersectionality, what we would call *intersectionality as live theory and practice*. Yet, without reducing intersectionality to a synonym for diversity work, it is also necessary to reflect on how diversity within the sciences is part of intersectionality and reflected in the lab.

37.2.1 *The role of diversity*

An active and important, but in many ways distinct, scholarly conversation concerning intersectionality within STEM fields is focused on *who* is practicing science (Armstrong and Jovanovic 2015; Charleston and Adserias 2014; Ong 2005). Intersectionality has been referenced in institutional efforts to address these issues, for example, the Center for Open Science's recent *Guidelines for Inclusive Practice in Science* are explicitly centered in intersectionality and contain recommendations for hiring practices, resumes, and interviews (<https://osf.io/muk7v/>).

The lack of inclusion of Black, Indigenous, and other minoritized identities is a major challenge to the legitimacy and trustworthiness of the sciences. As has long been demonstrated and theorized in feminist science studies and philosophy of science, *who* is practicing science influences the realm of hypotheses and research programs considered and has a major impact on the arc of scientific research (Collins 2019; Haraway 1988; Harding 2004; Longino 1990). Within our own lab, we have prioritized outreach and inclusion of diverse lab members. However, we have encountered challenges in recruiting diverse candidates. We believe this limits our lab in terms of the perspectives we consider, the work we undertake, and our approaches to our work, both scholarly and public. While we do not wish to eclipse or obscure the contributions of many people of color and of diverse sexualities and genders within our lab, we are currently a majority white lab space.

We are committed to ongoing reflection on why we have had relatively few non-white lab members, and to working to address barriers (both systemic and individual) and increase recruitment outreach. As one practical example of a possible barrier that we can address, we aim to fund our undergraduate research assistants, as a basic move toward equalizing formal research opportunities. We also prioritize networking and presenting at events that might draw diverse

scholars, such as the Black Feminist Health Science Studies Collaboratory, both to stay abreast of scholarly work and to ensure that we build the relationships necessary to recruit diverse students.

Other barriers may be more complex. For example, the focus of our lab on the science of sex differences can, by one framing, be seen as a concern of elite white women for whom sex is the primary marker of subordination. Here, we hope that as our work gains visibility it will be clearer how the focus in traditional sex differences research on “all women” compared to “all men” obscures variation within sex, including across race and ethnicity, and invisibilizes transgender, nonbinary, and gender expansive people. For us, there is no study of scientific claims of sex or gender without a consideration of how concepts of race, sexuality and class interact with and are already baked into such claims (Owens 2018; Roberts 1997). Our research contributions inform discourses about who is counted and visible in public health data, what explanations are privileged in studies about disease differences, and how institutionalized data collecting and reporting practices impact the data’s usefulness to marginalized communities.

37.2.2 Disseminating knowledge through nontraditional modes of publication

Finally, we believe that intersectionality calls on us to consider how our research is distributed and requires moving beyond traditional models of scholarly publication and dissemination to write for wider audiences both in and out of the academy. One of our principal means of doing this dissemination work—reflecting our mantra of producing “knowledge that matters”—is by generating multi-media packaging of the research we produce. For most of our research, the published peer-reviewed paper is simply one dimension of the work. We always aim to simultaneously publish a high-visibility op-ed and roll out accessible, often multi-part, “explainers” on our blog (Boulicault and Reiches 2021; Shattuck-Heidorn 2020) We have also published open-access lesson plans and teaching materials (“Gender/Sex in COVID-19 Teaching Module,” n.d.) and a guide for reporting responsibly and accurately about gender/sex in COVID-19 for journalists (Danielsen and Noll 2020). In this way, we aim to make critical interventions in both scholarly and public spheres.

On our blog, we write for experts across disciplines and for the broader public. These blog posts, especially, represent a substantial labor of love. The posts are often deeply involved, delving into aspects that fit alongside the published piece but that often were not welcomed in the context of a STEM publication. For our paper on sperm decline science, for example, we delved into the methodology and philosophy of measurement of sperm samples (Boulicault 2021) and documented the alt-right’s coverage of the sperm decline hypothesis (Perret 2021). While geared toward a general audience, the blog pieces are rigorous, cited, and peer-reviewed internal to the lab, sometimes taking as much or more time than the academic publication. But, together with the op-eds, this writing allows us to have a much broader impact than traditional academic journals. In 2020, our website had nearly 30,000 visits, and individual blog posts had as many as 3,600 reads.

As we consider our multi-media publication strategy, it is worth taking a moment to consider the placement of the lab at Harvard University. After all, when considering a discussion of counter-hegemonic or even radical intellectual projects, it can hardly go unmentioned that the lab sits at one of the most powerful universities in the world. We have sought to strategically engage the advantages that come with this. Headlines such as “Freaking Out About Declining Sperm Count? Don’t, Harvard Researchers Say” came straight from our own press release (Santora 2021). Many aspects of our press engagement strategies and our multi-media packaging of research could be applied at other institutions and outside of the university. Learning multi-

media strategies and how to write press releases, honing skills for writing op-eds, cultivating a list of reporters who work gender/sex, race, and social justice beats—these are ways in which, as scholars, we aim to increase the real-world impact of our work.

37.3 Conclusion

Within the sciences, there are increasing calls for incorporating intersectionality as a theoretical framework in the development of research questions and in methodological approaches (Agénor 2020; Bowleg 2012). When we consider our recent research experiences, the primary question that arises is not whether quantitative fields can effectively incorporate intersectionality methodologically. Rather, it is whether these disciplines are prepared to expand their definitions of ways of knowing so as to create space for intersectional analysis in the STEM fields.

Like others (Bauer 2014; Bowleg and Bauer 2016; Else-Quest and Hyde 2016), we find that quantitative analyses alone are insufficient as a practice of intersectionality. In our COVID-19 work we found that, despite our commitment to a social justice-oriented stance motivated by intersectionality, the analysis itself did not fulfill our goals. Rather, it was our contextualizing framework and discussion of our results, and our work to make our results more widely known, that push us to consider this research as intersectionality in practice. In contrast, in our analysis of sperm decline literature, we did not conduct any statistical analyses motivated by intersectionality; however, we found that unpacking how unexamined gendered and raced assumptions underlay the sperm decline claims perhaps more deeply reflected the tenets of intersectionality. In both research areas, we believe our multi/inter/anti-disciplinarity as a lab was fundamental to how we practice intersectionality, while also bringing its own challenges in the confines of the academy.

We have learned that the active consideration of societal power dynamics is likely much harder to incorporate into STEM fields than the simple inclusion and analysis of diverse and intersecting identity categories. Indeed, we find the greatest resistance to our own work in the areas where we cross disciplinary boundaries and incorporate feminist and anti-racist theory. We find that the STEM fields continue to see themselves as inherently, even mandatorily, apolitical, despite decades of scholarship establishing that science is socially situated and deeply inflected with political values at multiple levels (Collins 2019; Haraway 1988; Harding 2004; Richardson 2013; Roberts 1997). Intersectional analyses within the biomedical sciences will require a broad range of disciplinary frameworks, tools, and methodologies. Due to strict disciplinarity, and a vision of scientific objectivity as value-neutrality, STEM fields risk co-opting intersectionality and reducing it to a neoliberal politics of “diversity” that is unmoored from greater questions of social justice and structural power dynamics (Bilge 2014).

Our practice of intersectionality in the STEM fields cannot be boiled down to a checklist, e.g., does an analysis consider certain specified variables. Rather, practicing intersectionality will likely require building and sustaining rich, interdisciplinary, and diverse communities empowered to challenge traditional knowledge making structures. This work is challenging within the traditional confines of academia, but worth it. When we ask lab members to talk about what aspects of the lab they find most valuable and generative, the points we have raised here (working across disciplines, interrogating power structures, working to incorporate critiques of academic power structures into the foundation of the lab), emerge as central to why members join, and stay, in lab. An intersectional framework is essential for our analyses of gender/sex in the biomedical sciences, and for producing knowledge that matters. We find that, for us, the process of practicing intersectionality can offer ways to fundamentally reimagine how scientific research is conducted.

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PART VIII

Popular culture at the intersections



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CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND THE PARADOX OF METHOD

Nikki S. Lee performing intersectionality

Leslie Bow

I begin with a provocation: the most representative human being on the planet is an adult Asian woman.¹ Why does this assertion smack of heresy?

For one, it calls forth an antiquated humanism, albeit with a different center, that anti-humanism and its eventual method, intersectionality, sought to displace. There is no such thing as a “representative” human being, obviously. Yet the affront of this declaration lies in what is *philosophically* unimaginable; it requires a radical shift of perspective. “Asian woman” is seen as too particular, too embodied to stand in for of all humanity. That positionality is often relegated to sidekick status, an add-on to discussions of race, feminism, nationality, class, or sexuality.²

I begin with this performative gesture asserting the unthinkability of “Asian Woman” as universal subject not to reencode or otherwise validate the unmarked, illusory space of universality, but to muscle in to the imaginary Venn diagram of intersectionality. What methodological challenge would it pose to put “Asian and female” in its center? In 1977, the Combahee River Collective’s (1979 [1977], 210) “A Black Feminist Statement” articulated a commitment to “integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.” The plethora of associations ignited by Asian female embodiment in the US resists fixity, especially given the instability of meaning accorded to Asian gendered difference. The interstitial space Asian Americans occupy in the US racial imaginary represents, as I discuss elsewhere (Bow 2010), an alternative spatialization: not an intersection but a continuum bounded on one end by racial abjection and, on the other, unmarked privilege. On a veiled US gender continuum privileging liberal feminism, Asian American women are placed somewhere in between tradition and modernity. The in-between can be a site of cultural unease, of apprehension. But it can also be instructive.

This chapter engages intersectional method against the *performance* of intersectionality by exploring the work of Nikki S. Lee who mines these interstitial spaces in her provocative visual art. The photographs in Lee’s *Projects* (1997–2001) portray the costumed, Korean-born artist as a member of diverse US subcultures based on hobbies and activities (skateboarders, tourists, punks); professions (yuppies, exotic dancers); age (seniors); and, most significantly here, racial-ethnic groups (Latinx) or racialized affinity groups (hip-hop) (Lee 2001) (Figure 38.1). Staging her among communities *as one of them*, Lee’s photographs appear to assert the fluidity of identity across lines of generation, sexuality, race, or class. Celebrated in the most influential venues of US



Figure 38.1 Nikki S. Lee, “Hispanic Project” (25), 1998.

art, her work nonetheless also produces significant pushback, generating charges of imposture, blackface, brownface, and cultural appropriation.

The accusation of theft represents a race-forward perspective intending to illuminate the commodification of cultural practices and creativity of communities of color. Theorist bell hooks (1992, 21) deemed the appropriation of culture “eating the other,” foregrounding the ways that consumption represents exploitative possession and superficial accessorizing: “Within commodity culture,” she writes, “ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (21). Expressing racial solidarity by drawing boundaries around authenticity and group ownership, the charge of appropriation rests somewhat uneasily within intersectional approaches that affirm reading across and within perspectives and identities. Yet as Jennifer Nash (2019) has shown, contestations surrounding origins and ownership came to surround intersectionality itself.

The charge of appropriation reveals a commitment to the authentic, what might be seen as a commitment to a single axis of interpretation. Yet the accusation of theft also reveals a paradox at the foundation of intersectional methods of reading. Intersectionality affirms the fluidity of “both and” yet it also necessarily presumes its inverse: the static quality of standpoint, identity, or affiliation necessary to projecting a coherent, stable notion of difference. Lee’s inserting herself visually into various communities models the challenges to intersectional analysis as specific identity categories in turn become foregrounded and contested in critical readings of her work. Yet interpreting *Projects* also offers a provocation to intersectional method. In what follows, I consider a potential paradox within intersectionality, one evident in Lee’s art itself: in the process of illuminating differences within communities, intersectionality may ironically risk encoding static concepts of groupness. At the moment it hopes to unveil complexity in multiplicity, to what extent does the method require an “authentic” or representative subject that yet veers toward the fixity of typing?

In “Tourist Project,” Nikki smiles at the camera dressed in an oversized graphic tee, denim Bermuda shorts, baseball cap, and dad sneakers, an outfit identical to that of the three white women enjoying the sights at Rockefeller Center (Figure 38.2). In “Swingers Project,” her dance partner joyfully suspends her upside down. As a “yuppie,” Nikki does



Figure 38.2 Nikki S. Lee, “Tourist Project,” (9), 1997.

lunch. She’s a skater, a punk, a right-wing hanger-on at a trailer park posing in front of a Confederate flag. *Projects* consists of 14 series of these documentary-style photographs, the result of a durational performance completed by 2001 as part of her MFA thesis at NYU. After developing a studied look as result of her ethnographic research, the artist, born Lee Seung-Hee and self-christened Nikki, observed and infiltrated various communities, a process lasting three-to-four months per series (Goldberg 2006). Often relying on a “native informant” or member of a subculture for access, Lee then enlisted a friend, passerby, or community member to take a photograph of her with a point-and-shoot camera, the low-tech, lowbrow type that stamps a date and time on each print. What each series has in common is the insertion of, in her own words, “a little Korean”³ in the picture, one who appears to be happy to belong.

The art world eagerly embraced both concept and artist, variously comparing her shapeshifting portraits to those of Cindy Sherman, her cross-cultural posturing to the photography of Tseng Kwong Chi, and her race or gender passing to the performance art of Eleanor Antin and Adrian Piper.⁴ Curators and art critics subtly referenced race in their characterization of *Projects* as visualizing *immigrant* assimilation and blending in (Davis 2006). Yet her trying on of identities was also derided as “C material in any high school sociology project.”⁵ *Projects* is both ethnographic and slyly anti-ethnographic.

Lee’s welcome into the highest echelons of art coincided with the popularization of academic ideas surrounding the social constructedness of identity, from Erving Goffman’s theory of the theatricality of everyday life in 1959, to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity in 1990. Documentaries such as *Paris Is Burning* depicting drag subculture in 1990s New York likewise popularized the notion of identity play. Lee’s drag-inspired portraits (including “Drag Queen Project,” 1997) followed the zeitgeist of self-transformation at its philosophical—and potentially ethical—core.

Lee’s impersonations continue to incite questions about the ethics of imposture, pretending to be what one is not.⁶ Ironically, the rise of “cancel culture” 20 years later would signal the ongoing relevance of Lee’s work, particularly as curating selfhood, the trying on of identities via filters, hairstyles, dance moves, memes, or settings, became commonplace as well as contested



Figure 38.3 Nikki S. Lee, “The Hip-Hop Project” (1), 2001.

on social media. The question of optics is also one of ethics, an association that becomes more evident when race is the center of analysis.

“Hispanic Project” and “Hip-Hop Project” opened Lee to charges of brownface, blackface, and cultural appropriation; ire was also directed at a white-dominated art world that celebrated her for her glib renderings of these communities. Like Rachel Dolezal whose white parents outed her for passing as Black in 2015, Lee “blackened up” for “Hip-Hop Project” through the use of bronzing make-up and repeated visits to a tanning salon; the images depict her partying alongside rappers and their entourages (Figure 38.3). One of the more vehement callouts to Lee’s work came from Asian American blogger Eunsong Kim: “Regarding Lee’s ‘Projects,’” she wrote, “I am ANGRY. It pisses me off. I do not need Museum Art style blackface and brownface in order to understand that Asian Americans are perpetrators of anti-black and anti-brown violence.”⁷ For Kim, Lee’s play represents belittling minstrelsy, an exercise in privilege that engages in the heedless, psychic harm of others. The images might also be read through the lens of “blackfishing,” the social media phenomenon in which white women mimic the style and skin tone of Black women as a specific aesthetic.⁸ Here, race passing assumes an ethical dimension: Lee’s posturing does not mean that she shares in the group’s precarity; she has the freedom to walk away, unaffected and unscathed.⁹

On the question of ethics, as Goffman (1959, 13) once noted, any social performance exerts a response from others, a relation that becomes suspect in cases of imposture:

Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person or a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect.

Imposture thus exerts a fraudulent “moral demand” from others. While the artist’s race passing does not exactly reflect deception as in Dozeal’s case, her presumed innocence toward “blackening up” exposes a faulty assumption underlying *Projects*: it places all subcultures along the same horizontal plane of voluntarily assumed interest groups. To put it bluntly, Latinx and other communities are not simply affinity groups. The desire to blend in thus appears as cultural appropriation when what one cathects to is the superficial, outward semblance of a culture; in the case of the two race-forward series, the visually expressed desire for affinity performs what I have elsewhere deemed “racist love” (Bow 2022).

Yet, response to *Projects* reveals multiple ways of assigning privilege within intersecting matrices of power and privilege, the hallmark of intersectional method. The charge of blackface imposture assumes that “Asianness” functions in a relation of exploitation to the Black community which is then required to remain static in that hierarchical relation.¹⁰ It reduces the “difference within” method of intersectional analysis to a single, competitive framework. In contrast, art critic Cherise Smith (2011, 17) argues that, while troubling, performance artists like Lee are not “present-day minstrels because they do not partake in gross exaggeration nor do they seek to pass as or for their adopted personae by suppressing or masking their ‘true’ selves.” She reads “Hip-Hop Project” in the context of Asian Americans who have been “acculturated African American” (220); further, her intriguing reading suggests that Lee’s physiological manipulation “doubles up her Asianness” in way that evokes yellowface or passing as *Asian*. Another Black art critic, Derek Conrad Murray (2004), reads “Hip-Hop Project” through a gendered lens in the context of a group show on hip-hop in contemporary art.¹¹ He individualizes the men groping Lee as members of the rap group Mobb Deep and situates Lee’s performance as that of a groupie. Lee’s satirical photographs, he writes, interrogate hip-hop’s masculinist gaze and the “display of black female bodies as sex toys” (15); Murray reads Lee’s contribution as a subversive commentary on woman-as-accessory endemic to the conventions of the genre, emphasizing the shared experience of Asian and Black women. In celebrating Lee’s move to undermine rap culture’s “exclusive racial identity” (15), the Black male critic’s focus is not on blackface, but eye candy.¹²

This varied critical reception highlights the value of intersectional reading’s flexibilities of spectatorship and identification, each critic foregrounding a different or differently weighted center. Yet the charge of appropriation inadvertently points to a problematic of intersectional analysis as well: how one assigns group characteristics. Lee relies on visual signs to self-script according to preconceived types. Posing as “Genie” (Figure 38.1) during New York’s National Puerto Rican Pride parade, Lee befriended a Latinx woman who then took her shopping to help her complete the look. In one sense, Lee’s get-ups simply mimic the aesthetic of newfound “friends”; in another, they veer into the territory of offensive ethnic Halloween costumes.

The ability to appropriate the external signs of Puerto Ricanness speaks to the portability of ethnic signs, what Manthia Diawara has called transtextuality, the “movement of cultural styles from character to character in film: hybridity, multiple subject positions” (Diawara and Kolbowski 1998, 51). Yet this means of racial abstraction is also linked to caricature, the simultaneous reduction and exaggeration of a people to signs and symbols. This bent toward stereotyping likewise underlies “Lesbian Project” in which Lee reported developing a “tough and macho character”¹³ prior to infiltrating a bar, a mindset exposing her presumption that the butch lesbian is most representative of the group. The affront of blackface and brownface is thus not simply appropriation, but, as in this series visualizing sexual minorities, stereotypical reduction that renders all groups visually uniform. That is, in order to portray the liberating fluidity of identity, Lee’s work paradoxically relies on the fixity and repetition of type.

This tension between surface characterization and conceptual depth in Lee's work speaks to a paradox within intersectional method itself. In the analysis of overlapping social structures, how is politically enabling group characterization likewise achieved through overgeneralization? Does the Venn diagram of intersectionality risk constructing representative types at the moment that it attempts to account for nuance through interlocking multiplicities of difference? To illustrate, Lee's documentation of specific racialized New York subcultures invites examination of those she did not choose to inhabit, for example, Korean nail salon workers, Chinese seamstresses, or Filipina healthcare workers, the not particularly joyful categories likely to be hailed by intersectional feminism to demonstrate the shared precarity of immigrant women. They reflect the prototypical Asian woman invoked by global feminism: those denied coeval status with white women whether through the portrayal of denied schooling and reproductive rights, caregiving or other affective service labor, arranged marriage, *sati*, sex trafficking, or the wearing the hijab. This "Asian woman" serves to illuminate differential vulnerabilities within the uneven development of neoliberal capitalism, yet risks replicating divisions between Global North and Global South. Based on scholarship submitted to the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, for example, Kathy Davis (2020, 116) concludes that the privileged subjects of European intersectional analysis are Muslim women, seen as "most likely to be the victims of exclusion and discrimination." Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988, 65) cautions against this replication of type in western academic feminist portrayals of women from developing countries:

This average third-world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being 'third-world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc.) This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the 'freedom' to make their own decisions.

That is, does performing intersectionality academically likewise involve the projection of types? As Nash (2019, 37) acutely notes, the defensiveness surrounding the ownership of intersectionality cloaks a displaced anxiety the status of "Black women": "[T]he intersectionality wars seem to be fights over intersectionality's meanings circulations, origins, 'appropriation,' and 'colonization,' but these fights are *actually* battles over the place of the discipline's key sign—Black woman—in the field imaginary." Over time, that "key sign" is perhaps not allowed to swerve from its original meaning. To put that conundrum in the context of popular representation, one Hollywood executive bemoaned the fact that when media executives "are looking for Black content, they're looking for Wakanda or poverty, with no in between."¹⁴ *Projects* raises questions about who is representative of a group, how we visualize that group, and to what end; these questions likewise apply to intersectional reading (Lee 2001). The "Asian/American woman" of intersectional feminism would not likely be the smiling shapeshifter of Lee's photographs.

When the Korean-born artist passes as "other" Asian as in "Young Japanese in the East Village," the photographs fail to, in Goffman's words, "create a scene" or exact the dissonance that would elevate the snapshot to art. In "Tourist Project," "School Girl Project," and "Exotic Dancer Project," Lee's presence is naturalized by Asian association: *foreign* tourist, *Japanese* schoolgirl; *Thai* sex worker. The latter two reflect the fetishism of Asian culture through a white, heterosexual, US male gaze, perhaps a comment on the racial-sexual fantasies that surround Asian female embodiment. Mining this tension between real and fake represents the artist's wink. And yet what meanings accrue to the spectator's surprise in confronting diverse communities whose only commonality lies in finding that, in the artist's words, "there's a little Korean there"?

Asians assume an uneasy place in the US as both people of color and “model minority,” ignored as a voting bloc and rendered absent in most demographic metrics of racial inequality. A token of its slipperiness as a category, ethnic groups counted as “Asian American” earn among the highest and lowest household incomes in the US, but it is only the former statistic that gets airplay.¹⁵ Moreover, Asian embodiment calls forth categories and associations beyond race and ethnicity: immigrant, citizen, nationality, foreignness, religion, diaspora, generation, public health, refugee, fluency, literacy. Within the matrix of intersecting axes of oppression and power, “Asianness” does not wholly cohere; it represents semiotic instability. In the context of US racialization, “Asian American” often functions a category of comparison, not a thing unto itself. What Lee’s work performs and exposes, then, is “Asianness” as *relationality*. If *Projects* visualizes a philosophy—who we are is only revealed in relation to others—it also performs the instability of racial meaning.¹⁶ This lack of fixity does not so much compromise intersectional reading as it signals its urgency, the necessity of accounting for degrees of complexity within oppressive systems and acknowledging the labile, contextual nature of social vulnerability—as well as the headiness of belonging.

More abstractly, ethical questions surrounding appropriation appear to hinge on the idea of cultural authenticity, most conventionally understood as faithfulness to an original form, whether music, art, fashion, or literature.¹⁷ Yet here, authenticity depends upon affective spectatorship: reading sincerity, the opposite of reading phoniness. This concept of the authentic celebrates the seamlessness between what is shown to the world and inner being, the convergence between what you *appear to be* and what you *are*.¹⁸ Both Goffman’s sociology of dramaturgy and Butler’s concept of performativity undermine that dichotomy, collapsing being and acting into an effect of social conditioning. The philosophical slippage between the two speaks to the contradiction of *Projects*: the realist verisimilitude of individual photographs is put into question by the whole. How could Lee be all these things, really? Indeed, Lee was neither a skateboarder nor a swing dancer but became both; she was not a stripper but performed as one. She did not *become* Black but became a groupie. Her appearance as Genie (Figure 38.1) is likewise a reminder that Asians can also “be” “Hispanic.” Visual culture here poses a challenge to reading race as embodied difference within and apart from its intersection with other affiliations; it questions what you know about someone simply by looking.

A tool allowing for analytic complexity and multiplicity, intersectionality represents, in Jasbir Puar’s (2007, 212) words, a “hermeneutic of *positionality* that seeks to account for locality, specificity, placement junctions.” In keeping with the movement axiom “the personal is political,” the practice of analyzing social structure through the lens of identity is a powerful foundation of intersectionality. Yet identity as *method* can also rely on seemingly transparent notions of who belongs to a specific community and shares its vulnerabilities in the material world. The paradox of intersectionality is also intrinsic to its intellectual innovation: it depends on representative categories in order to spatialize their intersection, ironically in the service of *countering* representative “Asianness,” gender, age, sexuality or any other means of categorization. To echo the tension of Lee’s *Projects*, the conundrum of intersectional method is to name—and, in part, to fix—categorizations of overlap even at the moment it intends to destabilize the singularity of any identity within a matrix of power. Lee’s work might also be said to reflect the resonance of assemblage, a form of spatialization alternative to intersectionality in which identity is attuned to the forces that, in Puar’s (2007, 212) words, “merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency.” In *Projects*, “Asian woman” is the conceit that binds all communities at the same time that what is Asian and female does not cohere: what you see is not necessarily what you get.

Pushing an Asian woman into the center of various US communities (including that of academic feminism) can also play against racial-gendered type. *Projects* depicts a performance

of fearlessness and presumption: Nikki is the ultimate party-crasher and wannabe. She asks us to imagine the unimaginable: “Asian/American woman” as the ultimate bridge figure and epicenter, the intersection of all communities, and her visual method has been my academic method here. Inserting “a little Korean” (or for that matter, little Asian American) where one arguably does not belong is both gimmick and gambit that succeeds in producing an alternative framing for Asian women in the US: not humble and nonthreatening but everywhere, everywoman, everyman. In her posturing with and against difference, Nikki S. Lee is both Asian sidekick and star of the show, outlier and the most representative human being on the planet.

Of course, we should be in the picture.

Notes

- 1 Based on global demographics, if one were to condense the world’s population into a single composite figure, the most representative person on the planet would be a Christian, Chinese-speaking, literate, Asian adult woman who has a primary school education and lives in a rural area. See the “toolbox” for global education website, “100People: A World Portrait: A Global Education Toolbox” which distills world population statistics and demographic data on gender, religion, age, literacy, region, language, etc. www.100people.org/#.
- 2 Here I am referencing #NotYourAsianSidekick highlighting the marginalization of Asian American women as part of an online campaign raising awareness of Asian American feminism. The viral twitter campaign was launched by activist and writer Suey Park in 2013. Katie McDonough, “#NotYourAsianSidekick ignites massive conversation about race, stereotypes and feminism,” *Salon*, Dec. 16, 2013.
- 3 Cited in a taped segment of *The INNERview* with host Susan Lee MacDonald, 2013. www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMychWgKedA.
- 4 See Ferguson 2001 and Goldberg 2006.
- 5 See Goldberg 2006 and “Teaching Modern and Contemporary Asian Art,” on the Guggenheim’s website, www.guggenheim.org/teaching-materials/teaching-modern-and-contemporary-asian-art/nikki-s-lee-%EC%9D%B4%EC%8A%B9%ED%9D%AC.
- 6 Tina Chen’s (2005) distinction between imposture as deceit and impersonation as mimicry is useful even as that division is blurry here. Lee’s work is not really like Coco Fusco’s and Guillermo Gómez Peña’s famous racial charade, “The Couple in the Cage,” at the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Nor does the role-playing of *Projects* assume valance of a “gotcha” art hoax such as the one ascribed to visual artist Joe Scanlan and his collaborator Jenn Kidwell who passed as the invented Black artist “Donelle Woolford” (2005–2014) to secure a spot at the 2014 Whitney Biennial. Lee always announces herself as an artist, not as elderly, lesbian, or a yuppie. Still, the women who posed with her wearing prosthetic-induced aging in “Senior Project” believed that Lee was as she appeared and attributed her disclosure of youth to senility.
- 7 The charge is not entirely misplaced. Lee expressed concern that her skin-darkening would affect her skin color permanently. Cited in *The INNERview*, 2013. In an uncredited citation, Kim (2016) cites Lee as saying, “I’m not Korean-American, which means I don’t have issues about race.”
- 8 A play on the social media hoax *catfishing*, Wanna Thompson coined the term *blackfishing* with a 2018 tweet: “Can we start a thread and post all of the white girls cosplaying as black women on Instagram? Let’s air them out because this is ALARMING.” See Wanna Thompson, “How White Women on Instagram are Profiting off Black Women,” *Paper.com*, November 14, 2018. www.papermag.com/white-women-blackfishing-instagram-2619714094.html?rebelltitem=1#rebelltitem1. See also Taylyn Washington-Harmon, “What is Blackfishing and Why Would Anyone Do It?” *Health.com*. August 17, 2020. www.health.com/mind-body/what-is-blackfishing.
- 9 In the contemporary context of “cancel culture” concerned with abuses of power, Lee’s insertion of herself into marginalized communities counters Goffman’s observation that we are “less concerned when someone impersonates a member of a disesteemed, non-crucial, profane status, such as that of a hobo or unskilled worker” (Goffman 1959, 60). In effect, this asymmetrical mimicry now conveys not homage but the mockery of punching down.

- 10 See also www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/nikki-s-lees-shapeshifting-art-cultural-appropriation-1202682096/.
- 11 The 2001 Bronx Museum show, “One Planet Under a Groove: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art,” featured Lee’s work as well as that of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Sanford Biggers, Renée Green, David Hammons, Keith Haring, Kori Newkirk, Chris Ofili, Adrian Piper, Gary Simmons, Susan Smith-Pinelo, and Hisashi Tenmyouya (Murray 2004). In fact, “Hip Hop Project” (2001) was commissioned for the show curated by Franklin Sirmans and Lydia Yee. Cited in Wendy Vogel, “Twenty Years On, Nikki S. Lee’s Shapeshifting Art Provokes Debates about Cultural Appropriation,” *Art in America*, March 26, 2020. www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/nikki-s-lees-shapeshifting-art-cultural-appropriation-1202682096/.
- 12 Interestingly, Murray’s interpretation sides with Kimberlé Crenshaw’s seminal reading of female objectification against Henry Louis Gates’ testimony on the ironic “signifying” practices of 2LiveCrew in their court hearing on obscenity. Crenshaw (1991) sees 2LiveCrew as exploiting Black women’s sexuality for a “cheap laugh” and connects misogynistic representation to tolerance for violence against women.
- 13 Cited in *The INNERview*, 2013.
- 14 Anonymous executive cited in Nicole Sperling, “Hollywood Loses \$10 Billion a Year Due to Lack of Diversity, Study Finds,” *The New York Times*, March 11, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/03/11/movies/hollywood-black-representation.html.
- 15 “The Rise of Asian Americans,” Pew Research Center, June 19, 2012, www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/.
- 16 The artist’s view of collective selfhood in *Projects* is seen as deriving from her Korean background, a cultural reading that contrasts with the individualist ethos of the West. Tellingly, Lee elsewhere ascribes this emphasis on relationality to be a function of gender. The work following *Projects*, *Parts* (2002–2003), comments on the putative incompleteness of heterosexual women in romantic partnerships by staging scenes of heterosexual romantic life and then literally cutting men out of the physical images. In this sense, *Parts* enacts the inverse of *Projects*’ emphasis on the communal nature of identity and identification: “Nikki” is here portrayed as single and singular.
- 17 For a discussion of infidelity to an original with particular reference to Asian diasporic identity, see Lowe 1994.
- 18 For a discussion of authenticity in regard to K-pop’s appropriation of hip-hop, for example, see Lie 2015.

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39

COMEDY, *M. BUTTERFLY*, AND THE POTENTIALS OF DISSONANCE*

Denise Cruz

Nothing gets dated faster than a joke.

—*Cathy Park Hong*, *Minor Feelings*

In any case, attempts to reproduce any comic event are always too late.

—*Judith Roof*, *The Comic Event*

Comedy helps us test or figure out what it means to say “us.” Always crossing lines, it helps us figure out what lines we desire or can bear.

—*Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai*, “*Comedy Has Issues*”

In late fall of 2017—almost 30 years after David Henry Hwang’s critically acclaimed *M. Butterfly* opened on Broadway—a new version premiered at the Cort Theatre in New York City. Described as a deconstructionist version of Puccini’s opera *Madama Butterfly* (which was based on a play by David Belasco from the novella by John Luther Long), *M. Butterfly* reimagines the decades-long love affair between French diplomat René Gallimard and his Chinese mistress Song Liling. It begins with Gallimard directly addressing the audience from a prison cell in France, where he promises to recount the story of his search for “the perfect woman.” In a series of flashbacks, Gallimard recalls meeting Song in China and their relationship during the years of the Vietnam war. The play later reveals that Song, assigned male at birth, is a Chinese spy who, under instructions from Comrade Chin, played the role of the submissive Asian butterfly in order to trick Gallimard into divulging information. In the play’s reversal of the Puccini opera, when confronted with Song in a western business suit, Gallimard is unable to give up the fantasy of his exotic Asian butterfly and kills himself. Although the original 1988 Broadway production, starring John Lithgow as Gallimard and B. D. Wong as Song, received mixed reviews, it was eventually deemed a resounding commercial and critical success.¹

Hwang was hesitant to remount *Butterfly* until he found the right moment. “I wasn’t in a hurry to have the play revived,” he recalls in a conversation with Gordon Cox. With Julie

Taymor (best known for *The Lion King*) directing, Clive Owen as Gallimard, and talented Jin Ha cast as Song Liling, the play opened to high expectations. The timing initially seemed appropriate. The ascendancy of China in the western consciousness—and in the global economy—had shifted the terms of transpacific relations, offering further complexity to the play’s representation of East and West. Hwang had also rewritten aspects of the play to address more fluid, nonbinary concepts of gender and sexuality. Most importantly, Hwang significantly revised Song’s character. Song presents as male much earlier because Hwang realized “that this particular surprise wouldn’t be as shocking 30 years later ... because we understand and we are exposed to many different gender expressions.”² Instead of the prominence of the Puccini opera *Madama Butterfly*, Taymor and Hwang concentrated on a Chinese opera, *the Butterfly Lovers*, which Taymor describes as “like a Shakespeare play in which a young woman” poses as a man and “falls in love as a man with a young scholar.”

The remount generated much curiosity and excitement, not only among fans of the original production, but also among scholars in the fields of Asian American, gender and sexuality, and performance studies.³ *M. Butterfly* was an important theatrical production because it “pushed Asian American production into a national consciousness.”⁴ The play was heralded for its compelling transnational and intersectional treatment of what were then called East–West relations. Given all of the hype, my colleague and I looked forward to seeing a performance of *M. Butterfly* for January 2018. But in mid-December I was dismayed to receive a note in my inbox with the subject line, “M. Butterfly, Closing Notice,” and the message, “M. BUTTERFLY will play its final performance on December 17, 2017, and has canceled all performances after that date.” The show’s ticket sales had been lackluster, and even though producers initially announced a move up of the closing date, they finally canceled months before the projected final date.

The mixed reviews of *Butterfly* provide a fascinating window into the cancellation. Many reviewers highlight the dissonance between the play they remembered and the 21st century version. Some observed that the critical work of the play seemed somehow less urgent. Even with Hwang and Taymor’s revisions, the play’s intersectionality, metatheatrical form, and subverting of binaries of race, gender, and sexuality—groundbreaking on the Broadway stage in 1988—now seemed outdated. The impact of Song Liling’s observation in Act Three (“Because I was an Oriental, I could never really be a man”) was drastically altered for a 21st century audience more familiar with nonbinary expressions, performances, and forms of gender and sexuality, as well as *M. Butterfly* itself. As Benjamin Brantley in *The New York Times* dismissively observed, “When the enigmatic title character in this breakthrough drama about the illusions of sexual and cultural identity is brusquely commanded to ‘Strip!’ by a stricken suitor, you’re apt to think, ‘No need guys. That’s already been taken care of.’”⁵ Some reviewers wondered, was Clive Owen too handsome for the role and therefore unconvincing as the beleaguered and rejected Gallimard? Was he immediately unsympathetic as a white male settler colonialist for modern audiences? Others took issue with the revised content. More than one review called attention to the “anatomically detailed” and “clinical description” of how Song managed sex with Gallimard;⁶ some took issue with the shift to the Chinese opera *The Butterfly Lovers*. More interestingly, the play’s reviewers seemed confounded by the production’s formal hybridity and sought to resolve this dissonance. Unlike the 1988 original, the 2017 version was not read as funny. Instead, it was perceived as “a critical minded drama” and a “gripping thriller,”⁷ and it “embraces a whole variety of styles without ever really committing to a fully consistent point of view.”⁸

In this essay, I work with rather than against this dissonance. What happens when the context of comedy and its political potential has shifted, when a joke or the play of humor is no longer funny? I argue that *M. Butterfly*—precisely because of the forms of dissonance it offers—still has much to tell us about intersectional and transnational approaches to race, gender, and sexuality;

our expectations regarding the genres these approaches should take; and the productive potential that might arise when teaching comedic drama with historical and contextualized care.

The analysis that follows was inspired not only by the revised production and reception of *M. Butterfly* but also my experience teaching the play over the course of roughly 15 years. It was through my teaching of the play and moments of dissonance in the classroom that prompted me to rethink the use of humor as a genre related to transnational and intersectional feminism, especially because comedy is pivotal to the play's intersectionality, on one hand, even though this comedy leads to interpretive and pedagogical problems, on the other.

As many scholars have observed, comedy is notoriously difficult to capture, analyze, or explain. "Any discussion of comedy," notes Judith Roof, "requires what can only be a partial iteration, which, alas, displaces the comic, inadvertently alienating the comedic from itself."⁹ Humor related to race, gender, sexuality, and violence is especially difficult. For these reasons, even though Josephine Lee has argued that "Asian American drama has both its tragic and its comic sides," comedy as a genre is not a form that is significant within Asian American literary criticism, especially with relation to gender and sexuality.¹⁰ "The serious work of humor," contends Nerissa Balce, "has yet to be part of ethnic American literature and Asian American literary studies."¹¹ Therefore even though comedy is significant to *M. Butterfly*, the play's adaptations—from the dark Cronenberg film to the more recent Broadway remount—lend themselves to emphasize the tragic elements of Hwang's play. But the foundation of the play is its generic and formal mix of comedy and tragedy, the dissonance produced by that hybridity, and the links between these disruptions and the play's interruption of intersectional and transnational narratives of Asians, Asian Americans, and their relationship to the West.

The comedy in the play, and the dissonance it produces, offers especially fraught yet rich territory for analyzing—and teaching our students to analyze—transnational and intersectional dynamics of race, gender and sexuality in their historicized and current forms. What does it mean to teach this play almost four decades after its original production, when China occupies a different space in the American imaginary? How might we teach a play that hinged on the revelation of a binaried construction of gender and sexuality? To answer these questions, I analyze the play through a range of textual, sonic, and visual tools, including the publication of the 1988 and 2017 versions, the video recording of the play housed in the New York Public Library's Theater and Film Archive, and the 1998 audio recording of the play produced by L. A. Theater Works.¹² Rather than the presumed rivalry between media recordings as an inferior version of live theater, or what Philip Auslander has called an often "reductive binary opposition of the live and the mediated" (3), here I'm interested in what the recording of a play can offer in terms of documenting aspects of a performance that are connected to but extend beyond the work of theater makers, especially audience laughter.

39.1 Dissonant reading

As I have argued elsewhere, my interest in dissonance has been especially influenced by Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*.¹³ Hong developed minor feelings in conversation with Sianne Ngai's "ugly feelings," which Ngai describes as a range of emotions and negative affects that are not cathartic, satisfactory, triumphant, or virtuous.¹⁴ Hong's "minor feelings," however, importantly differs from Ngai's formation in that minor feelings explicitly stem from the dissonance produced by racialization: the "range of emotions that are negative, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic, built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed."¹⁵ Minor feelings thus "occur when American optimism is forced upon you, which contradicts your own

racialized reality, therefore creating a static of *cognitive dissonance*” (emphasis added). Resisting tropes of immigrant or racial survival, emergence, bildungsroman, or growth, the “literature of minor feelings” does not work for “immediate emotional release” but is rather “cumulative” (57) in its affective accumulation.

Hong introduces “minor feelings” in an essay titled “Stand up,” a title that refers to the genre of comedic performance and her fascination with Richard Pryor. Hong spends hours transcribing and analyzing his material. But she soon “realized that Pryor on the page is not exactly funny. Without the hilarity of his delivery, Pryor’s words hit hard and blunt, as if the solvent of his humor has evaporated and left only the salt of his anger.” She starts paying closer attention to his recorded performances, including their glimpse of the audience. Inspired to experiment with the form, she began showing up to events where she has been scheduled to read poetry; she performed stand-up routines instead. She is met by the audience’s confusion but finds it liberating. For Hong, stand-up as a genre becomes tied to formal experimentation that previously seemed inaccessible to her. Comedy becomes an avenue for other kinds of standing up: the recognition of racialized violence, the dissonance she feels as an Asian American, the refusal to perform expectations of her as an Asian American author or as a poet. Hong is interested in forms of literature and culture that produce or engage with minor feelings, but Hong’s “Stand up” also notes other kinds of dissonance, such as the difference between humor, especially humor related to race, on the page (Pryor reads as angry) versus humor in performance, and the temporal importance of the experience of comedy. Or, as she observes, “The audience cannot be convinced into laughter. Real laughter is an involuntary contraction that busts out of you like an orgasm. You laugh from surprise but you’re only surprised once, which is why comedy ruthlessly lives in the present.”

Like Hong, I am interested in critical, pedagogical, and formal dissonance. Dissonance is usually characterized negatively, but does it need to be? Dissonance stems from a confounding of expectation, and those who experience might tend to seek out resolution and harmony. This method of reading for dissonance is somewhat difficult to encapsulate. Others have taken up the question of aesthetic dissonance—perhaps most famously, Theodor Adorno, as well as scholars of music theory, media studies, and narratological studies.¹⁶ Dissonance is inharmonious, discordant, marked by “disagreement,” “incongruity.” In music theory, dissonance, and its opposite, consonance, have formal elements that are especially helpful to an analogous reading of form and function in literature. Dissonance describes both musical elements and the listener’s experience of it. As Alexander Rehding notes, although consonance and dissonance can be technically described as “the relationships of harmonic or melodic intervals between simultaneous or successive pitches,” moving “beyond” these definitions leads to “difficult terrain, resorting to psychological or metaphoric dimensions such as unpleasantness and pleasantness, roughness and sweetness, fission and fusion, instability and stability, or tension and release.”¹⁷

This “difficult terrain,” however provides unique potential for scholars working at the intersection of race, gender and sexuality studies, and transnational studies. Dissonance describes not only formal qualities of literature but also our responses to it—psychological, metaphoric, and political. Dissonance in literature does make the world and its patterns seem strange, but unlike defamiliarization, distancing, or alienation, (Viktor Shklovsky, Bertolt Brecht), dissonance is less of an abrupt shock produced at the syntactical or structural level or through poetics.¹⁸ Instead, dissonance is captured less easily—it is accumulative, atmospheric, tonal, and, for lack of a better word, multidimensional.¹⁹ It responds to what is familiar and strange because of its familiarity, such as historic forms of racialization and racial violence that linger into our present. Reading and teaching for dissonance nevertheless demands attending to contextualized analysis that is attentive to genre, context, and history. While close, contextualized, and historicized reading

are well-practiced (and critiqued) modes of literary criticism, here I'm interested in how these practices do not necessarily move toward argumentative or analytical consonance.

David Henry Hwang has had a longstanding interest in producing theatrical dissonance for political ends. In studies of *M. Butterfly*, scholars often connect Hwang's dramatic techniques to the influential work of Brecht, German theatre practitioner, playwright, and poet, a critical move that seems even more appropriate given the connection between Brechtian theater and Chinese theater. Descriptions of Brechtian theater center on forms of distancing: the audience's awareness of theater as not the imitation of the real but rather as a form of production. Brecht described this particular theory in an essay commonly translated as "Alienation effects in Chinese Acting" (1935), spurred by his reflections after watching Mei Lanfang (1894–1961) perform a demonstration of what Westerners called "Beijing opera." Mei as a performer, in his mind, wasn't attempting to demonstrate "real life" but rather called attention to the performance itself.²⁰

Hwang has said that he admires Brecht, but that Brechtian distancing or alienation doesn't quite encapsulate his work. He has described the difference as in part tonal, or what he called, in a 1988 interview with John DiGaetani, his interest in the "butting up of unlikes," such as the "crassest type of sitcom" and opera, to produce "variety for the audience, it keeps them on their toes, it is inherently theatrical."²¹ When DiGaetani called attention the mix of comedy and tragedy in the play, Hwang moved away from the "strident tone" of Brechtian theater and instead offered what he called "total theatre" as an alternative:

first of all I think that comedy is very theatrical. I am generally interested in ways to create total theatre, theater which, utilizes whatever the medium has to offer to create an effect—just to keep an audience interested—whether that's dance or music or opera or comedy. All these things are very theatrical, even makeup changes and costumes—possibly because I grew up in a generation which isn't that acquainted with theatre. For theatre to hold my interest, it needs to pull out all of its stops and take advantage of everything it has—what it can do better than film and television. So it's very important for me to exploit all those elements, and comedy is one of them.²²

Here Hwang pinpoints comedy as important to the arsenal of the playwright's tools. In the original Broadway production of *M. Butterfly*, Hwang crafted this awareness of artifice and performance through direct address to the audience (a frequent break in the "fourth wall"), the use of disruptive sound and lighting effects, the use of metatheatricality, and a minimal set.

And while all of Hwang's work is interested in transnational politics, he is also intrigued by comedy as a means of holding onto an audience's interest.

Even though Hwang notes that the combination of comedy and tragedy makes the play's content more palatable to the audience, I am arguing that the result is more complicated, especially because the comedy in the play is important for the play's feminist and intersectional politics. As my students have observed, a failure to examine the play's comedy also renders invisible the importance of minor women characters in the play, and their use of wit, humor, and actions to subvert Western, white patriarchal dominance. Frequently, the play's most resistant feminist performances take comedic turns, including the character Renée and her bemused observations regarding geopolitics and phallic contests, Song Liling's playful interactions with Gallimard, and the multi-role performance of the actor who plays Comrade Chin (played by comedian Margaret Cho in the L.A. Theater Works production).

The play's frequently discussed metatheatricality extends to its self-reflexive use of comedic genres such as the sit-com, the stand-up routine, and the role of Asian performers in stereotypical comedic roles and as objects of laughter. In Act One, Gallimard serves as narrator, staging a

re-enactment of scenes in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, the tragic opera in which Cho-Cho San (the butterfly in the opera) falls in love with a westerner. In the Puccini opera, Cho-Cho San commits suicide onstage. The re-enactment is playful and funny. It pivots on a mixture of the high and the low, and features characters who resist Gallimard's narrative control in various ways. The actor who plays Comrade Chin assumes another minor character role (Suzuki), playing her as best friend in a 1980s sitcom:

SUZUKI: Girl, he's a loser. What'd he ever give to you? Nineteen cents and those ugly Day-Glo stockings? Look it's finished! Kaput! Done! And you should be glad! I mean, the guy was a woofer! He tried before, you know—before he met you, he went down to geisha central and plunked down his spare change in front of the usual candidates—everyone else gagged!

Hwang's stage directions (and the performance in the 1988 video recording) also use the disjunction between the scripted dialogue and the actor's actions; after concluding the speech above, "Suzuki stalks offstage." At the end of the scene, as Gallimard describes the "the moment that redeems [Cho-Cho San's] years of waiting. With Suzuki's help, they cover the room with flowers." Chin as Suzuki interrupts and "trudges onstage and drops a lone flower without much enthusiasm."

The forms of comedic dissonance here are related to the other kinds of jarring effects (from defamiliarization to distancing to alienation), the "shock" that art can create to jolt one out of contemporary patterns. This recognition is, of course, pivotal to the play, but I'm also interested in the potential of a different kind of dissonance: the disjunction created by a comedic event and its staging in a particular historical moment. Or, to put it more plainly: what do we do with comedy that is no longer funny?

39.2 Dissonant pedagogies

I now teach *M. Butterfly* through two forms of dissonance: the dissonant experience created by the play, and the dissonance between the reactions of contemporary audience and those of a historical audience. This form of dissonance, of course, isn't isolated to Hwang's play alone, and it's been encountered and dealt with by other scholars who have worked to reconstruct the historical conditions of comedy. Even though the play is a cultural touchstone as an intersectional and transnational work, it poses pedagogical challenges. The politics of *M. Butterfly*, at one point progressive and liberal, now present differently in a 21st century context.

From its opening, the play stages a dilemma of comedic and political dissonance: do we, as an audience, laugh with or at Gallimard, or something in between? And what are the stakes of this laughter? While Gallimard clings to the fantasy of Song as an exotic Asian butterfly above all, the play crafts an audience that ostensibly knows better; or, in Taymor's words, "You know right at the beginning ... and if you didn't notice then you're like Gallimard" (emphasis added). Taymor recognized that for some people familiar with the original version, the 2017 elimination of the "reveal" posed some difficulty: "What's hard for some people who just saw it, somebody just said, 'Oh, it's not a surprise at the end!'" "No," she continues "it's not a surprise at the end, it's not supposed to be a surprise at the end. You know right at the beginning ... and if you didn't notice then you're like Gallimard. But," she stresses, "ultimately that's not even the point." The comedy in *M. Butterfly* frequently works to highlight or expose hierarchies of race, class, and post-war geopolitics. The play's comedic moments also often serve as forms of humorous redirection related to gender and sexuality, highlighting what Gallimard (and the audience) do and do not know—or know but refuse to recognize.

One of the best examples of this element of the play is its recurring use of dramatic irony. In the second scene of Act I (1988), Gallimard looks on from his prison cell as he becomes “the life of every social function”:

WOMAN: And what of Gallimard?

MAN 1: Gallimard?

MAN 2: Gallimard!

GALLIMARD (*to us*): You see? They’re all determined to say my name, as if it were some new dance.

WOMAN: He still claims not to believe the truth.

MAN 1: What? Still? Even since the trial?

WOMAN: Yes. Isn’t it mad?

MAN 2 (*laughing*): He says, it was dark ... and she was very modest!

The trio break into laughter.

MAN 1: So—what? He never touched her with his hands?

MAN 2: Perhaps he did, and simply misidentified the equipment. A compelling case for sex education in the schools. (3)

At this moment, as he looks on, Gallimard doesn’t realize that he is the subject of a joke. But since this conversation occurs so early, an audience member, depending on how much they knew about the play in advance, wouldn’t necessarily be aware of exactly why the trio is mocking Gallimard (and it’s worth noting that many of my students, when they read the play, frequently are genuinely surprised in Act III). The stage directions highlight this disjunction in ways that continue throughout the play. Characters laugh at rather than with one another, and laughter in particular marks moments of dissonance especially when rigid constructs of East/West or gender and sexuality run up against each other.

While Taymor focused on the audience’s distance from Gallimard, I argue that the audience dynamics are a bit more complicated, for the play constantly plays with the audience’s affiliations. Comedy is essential to creating a complicit audience through their laughter. Brantley’s *New York Times* review of the 2017 production flagged this discrepancy: “for ‘*M. Butterfly*’ to have emotional impact, it must make its audiences uneasily complicit in that fantasy.” As Tina Chen notes, even though the play engineers “newly constructed spaces of politicized performativity for the spectator,” the audience can still align with Gallimard as the “protagonist of this tortured love story,” who has been tricked by Song.²³

Comedy is pivotal to this aim, for even if an audience questioned Gallimard’s desire to control his butterfly, members of the audience were still played for laughs. The 1988 *M. Butterfly* used humor to draw in an audience before deconstructing the terms of this laughter as the play progressed. Of course, in Hwang’s play what is “funny” is often, upon further reflection, revealed to be not funny at all but rather rooted in forms of violence. Teaching the play in the 21st century has become more and more challenging, in part because students are aware of these complexities. My teaching of the play changed considerably when I began assigning the entirety of the L.A. Theater Works recording, featuring John Lithgow and B. D. Wong reprising their original roles, and comedian Margaret Cho performing as Comrade Chin. The play was performed at the DoubleTree in Santa Monica in June 1996 before a studio audience. The recording captures the play’s attention to sound and its use of musical and sonic dissonance. The details are carefully described in the play’s stage directions. They include the strategic use of the Puccini opera, for example, drifting in the background and then interrupted, or the use of percussion and other sound effects to disrupt the play.

But the play's stage directions do not capture an element that is engineered by the play: the sound of an audience laughing. In both the video and audio recording of the play, at times the audience laughs out of discomfort, but the laughter is also clearly a response to the comedy of the play. This reaction may seem obvious, but it isn't. Because of the play's subject—or what Hwang and DiGaetani called “essentially tragic”—content, it's easy for a *reader* to minimize the play's comedic content (I've had a similar experience when teaching Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*). I used to play just excerpts of the recording in class, but I began assigning the entirety because, in part, of what my students began telling me: they didn't realize, until they heard the recording of the play's performers *and* its audience, how funny the play was.

The dynamics of humor in *M. Butterfly* depend in many ways on calling attention to and then disrupting hierarchies of power. The 1988 play includes an extended use of the metaphor of pinning, introduced for the first time in Act One, Scene 11, when Gallimard tells that audience that in Puccini's “*Madame Butterfly*, Cio-Cio-San fears that the Western man who catches a butterfly will pierce its heart with a needle, then leave it to perish.” Gallimard then “began to wonder: had I too, caught a butterfly who would writhe on a needle?” Pinning emerges as a central metaphor in the 1988 play, a violent act of control (Gallimard not only wants to pierce the butterfly but rather wants to see the butterfly “writhe”). The text uses the metaphor of pinning to call attention to how assumptions about the Eastern desire for submission have led to both colonizing Asia and Southeast Asia. The act of pinning a butterfly recalls the practice of imperial forms of collection, from the curio cabinet to the museum display to the scientific studies that documented imperial holdings. Gallimard speaks these lines from a desk in the French Embassy in Beijing, and as he discusses his plans for Song, he is notably participating in the actions of his diplomatic office. As the stage directions indicate, while “Gallimard speaks, [his friend] Marc hands papers to him. He peruses, then signs, stamps or rejects them.”

In the 1988 version of the play, “pinning” and “pins” are referred to in subsequent scenes as puns that refer to penises, sexual violence, and transnational violence and its cyclic recurrence in East–West transnational relations.²⁴ At one point, Gallimard is confronted by a woman, Renée, who argues that wars in general as the “the whole world run by a bunch of men with pricks the size of pins” (56). But the play also reverses the power dynamics in problematic ways, even though it highlights a culture of toxic masculinity and its relationship to imperial and global violence, or what Song, at the opening of Act III, calls the West's “international rape mentality towards the East” (83). In Act One, Scene 11 Gallimard and Marc, “the most popular guy in school,” recall Gallimard's first sexual experience with a woman named Isabelle (and Marc's role in engineering it). Marc expects Gallimard to be triumphant but is shocked when Gallimard does not mirror his bravado. Gallimard's arms are “pinned to the dirt,” as he finds himself on the ground with a woman on top of him “huffing and puffing like a locomotive.” He thinks “God. So this is *it?*” as he feels as if his “legs were losing circulation” (33). In the 1988 original, this scene was one of strategic reversal. The white male settler and colonist, the bureaucrat who had triumphantly declared that he wanted to see the Asian object of his desire “writhe on a needle,” is depicted “pinned” to the ground.

Illustrated by recordings of the play in 1988 and 1998, the audience laughed at this scene, which is essentially an extended rape joke, in spite of (or perhaps because of) its grounding in misogyny, homophobia, and racism. It's of course impossible to know why, but the presence of laughter is incontrovertible. In the classroom, the recorded laughter functions to create what William Cheng has called a comedic alibi, which in one form “draws strength from the assumption that if *enough* people are laughing—if something is sufficiently funny by consensus—then the burden of responsibility becomes diffuse, soothing moral qualms along the way.”²⁵ (Cheng

546–7). Cheng is interested in excavating the complexities of comedic alibis in humor related to race, gender, and sexuality (think, for example, of the excuse “it’s just a joke”). Here, I’m interested in how the consensus of laughter also provides a different kind of analytical potential: as evidence of humor, and as permission to consider its political stakes with analytical distance.

Listening to the recorded laughter and using it as an object of analysis, my students today are able to question the stakes of the scene’s reversal. They call attention to how the scene depends upon the image of Mark bullying Gallimard into having non-consensual sex, his arms pinned to the dirt. These conversations have led to fine-grained discussions of the development of the consenting subject as tied to white patriarchal privilege: the right to claim who can or can’t consent, who is or isn’t property. When I teach the recurring references to pinning in the play, my students and I connect these forms of violence to the play’s interest in questioning Gallimard’s subjectivity throughout the play (it’s notable, for example, that the play is set entirely within Gallimard’s imagination). They are fascinated by the fact that in the 2017 version, Hwang scrubbed all references to pinning. The recording is useful in both creating and recognizing dissonance in productive ways, for as a contemporary audience of students reading the play for an Asian American literature class, we can use the audience’s laughter to think about intent, context, and the political repercussions of humor.

39.3 Dissonant laughter

The word, “dissonance,” centers on a “harsh” or “inharmonious” combination of sounds.²⁶ In this section, I revisit the sonic qualities of dissonance in *M. Butterfly*, especially through its use of the sound of laughter and its direct attention to comedic performance as a genre. The presence and absence of laughter is critical to the 1988 play’s concluding scenes. The various revelations and reversals in the act turn on performances that do and do not elicit laughter, both onstage and in the audience. *M. Butterfly*, as others have noted, destabilizes structures—physical and spatial, geopolitical and representational, theatrical and narrative. A key feature of the 1988 play is a switch in narrative control. In a reversal of the play’s opening, Song begins Act III with a direct address to the audience. Dressed in an Armani suit, Song is in a courtroom testifying. The trial’s spectacle pivots not on Gallimard’s acts of espionage but rather the question: How could Gallimard, after 20 years, not know the truth about Song?

Song resists the judge on a number of levels. The judge keeps asking variations of the same question, but Song refuses to answer. The scene sets up two audiences; the judge listening onstage, who repeatedly fails to recognize his perpetuation of Orientalist and heteronormative binaries, versus the audience in the theater, who is aligned with Song and repeatedly laughs with him. Performing as Song, B. D. Wong at first banters with the judge, slipping in and out of the role of *Butterfly* and with a vocal tone that ranges from snide to sarcastic to contempt. “I’m sure you are,” he laughs snidely, when the judge asks him to “enlighten the court with this secret knowledge. I’m sure we’re all curious” (82). Wong’s performance eventually gives way to his growing rage and frustration. Song reveals the West’s failure to understand or completely comprehend Asia, in part because they willingly believe in the West’s dominance. He directly refers to the judge’s failures with the line “tough room,” a phrase that comedian’s use in stand-up routines to refer to an audience that doesn’t laugh, or the disjunction between a comedian and the audience. Tough carries multiple meanings in this scene: difficult, obdurate, impliable, inflexible, hypermasculine. But the “tough room” of the courtroom is very different from the intimacy created between Song and the theater audience.

The climactic “reveal” scene in the 1988 play, with Song stripping before the audience and Gallimard, also features the importance of laughter a signifier of dissonance. As Song stands

naked before Gallimard, the stage directions indicate that “*we and Song come to the realization that what we had thought to be Gallimard’s sobbing is actually his laughter.*” “Look at you! You’re a man!” Gallimard explains while laughing.

GALLIMARD: Oh god! What an idiot! Of course!

SONG: Rene—what?

GALLIMARD: Look at you! You’re a man! (*He bursts into laughter again*)

SONG: I fail to see what’s so funny!

GALLIMARD: “You fail to see—!” I mean, you never did have much of a sense of humor, did you? I just think it’s ridiculously funny that I’ve wasted so much time on just a man!

The scene as a whole is painful to watch or listen to. The difficulty of the scene pivots on two forms of dissonance. Song expects that Gallimard, after years of intimacy, will continue to love him, and Gallimard’s own cognitive dissonance stems from the fact that despite years of a relationship, this “evidence” is not enough to convince him. The terms of comedy are also reversed: the laughter, “what’s so funny” or “ridiculously funny,” an ostensible “sense of humor.” Yet as indicated by the stage directions, the audience is meant to be aligned with Song, as we and Song realize that “*what we had thought to be Gallimard’s sobbing is actually his laughter.*” In the final class on *M. Butterfly*, I play the sound recording of this scene. I’m always struck by the dissonance between silence and Gallimard’s laughter. Other than Gallimard, no one laughs—onstage or in the contemporary space of the classroom.

For a play that is so driven by dissonance, it’s initially striking to see how those who respond to it—in scholarship, in reviews, or as readers—become fixated on the play’s tragic rather than comic moments. But perhaps this is not so surprising. The play’s concluding scenes and plot lend themselves to an emphasis on the tragic. The content also lends itself to emphasize the tragic. In examining these forms of dissonance in *M. Butterfly*, I’m interested in the potential of lingering in this uneasy, hybrid intersection of genre, form, and subject matter. For while I don’t know how long I’ll keep Hwang on my Asian American literature syllabus, I do know that the play still raises important questions, and that students, at least for now, still respond to the work with generative dissonance. Some find the play compelling (it’s still the work students are most likely to choose to write about); others are not as convinced. The intersectional politics and form of the play still register as uneasy and uncertain, and they resist catharsis and closure in ways that make it particularly fitting for the 21st-century classroom.²⁷

As I prepare to teach the play again in the future, I will do so in the wake of a pandemic and its aftermath; continued inequities in health care and higher education; anti-Black and anti-Asian racism and violence; attacks on scholars of critical race studies and feminism. In this context, any focus on comedy, humor, and laughter might easily be seen as dismissive. Nevertheless, I can’t help but think that reading and teaching dissonance in *M. Butterfly* is an exercise not of historical distancing but rather the opposite, a dwelling in the repercussions of our violent transnational past and its permutations in the present.

Notes

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1 For an analysis of the New York critical reception, see Angela Pao, “The Critic and the Butterfly: Sociocultural Contexts and the Reception of David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*,” *Amerasia Journal* 18 (2007), 1–18. For a fascinating treatment of “translocal” geographies of performance in New York, London, and Singapore, see Amanda Rogers. “Butterfly Takes Flight: the Translocal Circulation of Creative Practice,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, no. 7 (2011), 663–83.

- 2 It's worth noting that Hwang received many invitations to revive *Butterfly*. As Hwang notes in a conversation with Taymor and Gordon Cox in an interview for the podcast *Stagecraft*, he "wasn't in a hurry to have the play revived." Taymor recalls asking Hwang whether or not he might be "willing to open up this work, which is like a modern classic." Hwang agreed. Stagecraft with Gordon Cox, Episode 10, "Julie Taymor and David Henry Hwang," December 5, 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/legit/news/stagecraft-podcast-julie-taymor-david-henry-hwang-m-butterfly-1202631001/>
- 3 While Asian American critics agree on the significance of the play, they certainly don't always agree on its politics and repercussions. For a representative range, see Karen Shimakawa, "'Who's to Say?' Or, Making Space for Gender and Ethnicity in *M. Butterfly*," *Theatre Journal* 45, no. 3 (1993), 349–62; Josephine Lee, "The Seduction of the Stereotype" in *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity On the Contemporary Stage* (Temple University Press, 1997), 89–120; Doreen Kondo, "M. Butterfly: Orientalism, Gender, and a Critique of Essentialist Identity," *Cultural Critique* 16 (1990), 5–29; David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Duke University Press, 2001), 137–66; Colleen Lye, "M. Butterfly and the Rhetoric of Antiessentialism: Minority Discourse in an International Frame" in *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, edited by David Palumbo-Liu (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 260–89.
- 4 Amanda Rogers, 671.
- 5 Benjamin Brantley, *The New York Times*, December 17, 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/theater/review-m-butterfly-david-henry-hwang-julie-taymor-broadway.html (Accessed July 10, 2021).
- 6 Allison Adato, "Gripping M Butterfly Soars Anew With Clive Owen: EW Stage Review" *Entertainment Weekly*, October 26, 2017, <https://ew.com/theater/2017/10/26/m-butterfly-broadway-review/> (Accessed July 9, 2021); Alexis Soloski, "M. Butterfly Review—Clive Owen Impresses in Julie Taymor's Revision," *The Guardian*, October 26, 2017, www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/oct/26/m-butterfly-clive-owen-review (Accessed July 9, 2021).
- 7 Matt Windman, "M. Butterfly Review: a Disastrous Broadway Revival" *AMNY Newsletter*, October 26, 2017, www.amny.com/entertainment/m-butterfly-review-a-disastrous-broadway-revival-1.14636469/ (Accessed July 10, 2021).
- 8 Chris Jones, "In Revised 'M. Butterfly' on Broadway, Clive Owen is No French Bureaucrat," *Chicago Tribune* October 26, 2017, www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/sc-ent-m-butterfly-review-1027-story.html (Accessed July 10, 2021).
- 9 Judith Roof, *The Comic Event: Comedic Performance From the 1950s to the Present* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 5.
- 10 Josephine Lee, "Asian American Drama," *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature*, edited by Crystal Parikh and Daniel Y. Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 89–100, 89, doi:10.1017/CBO9781316155011.009. Lee's essay is a useful overview of Asian American drama; for more extensive treatments of theater see Lee, *Performing Asian America*; Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Duke University Press, 2002), and Ju Yon Kim, *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday* (New York University Press, 2015). See also Carolyn Kyungah Hong, "Comedy, Humor, and Asian American Representation," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature and Culture*, ed. Josephine Lee (Oxford University Press), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780190699628.001.0001/acref-9780190699628-e-809> (Accessed July 20, 2021); see also Rachel Lee, "Where's My Parade: Margaret Cho and the Asian American Body in Space," *TDR: The Drama Review* 48, no. 2 (2004), 108–132.
- 11 Nerissa Balce, "Laughter Against the State: On Humor, Postcolonial Satire, and Asian American Short Fiction," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 19, no. 1 (2016), 47–73, 47.
- 12 Hwang, David Henry, *M. Butterfly*. Videotaped by The New York Public Library's Theatre on Film and Tape Archive at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre, New York, N.Y., August 16, 1988 and David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly*, *L. A. Theater Works*, Santa Monica, June 1996, <https://latw.org/title/m-butterfly>.
- 13 Although some of the material below is an expansion of my work in "On Dissonance and its Functions in Asian American Criticism," forthcoming in *American Literary History*, that essay focuses on fiction rather than comedy.
- 14 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 6.
- 15 Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings* (New York: One World, 2020), 55.
- 16 See for example Aaron Kerner and Julian Hoxter's summary of these approaches in their chapter on narrative dissonance in *Theorizing Stupid Media: De-Naturalizing Story Structures in the Cinematic, Televisual, and Video Games* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28176-2_4.

- 17 Alexander Rehding, "Consonance and Dissonance," *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Concepts in Music Theory* (2018), 441. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190454746.013.14>
- 18 Viktor Shklovsky, "Art, as Device," introduced and translated by Alexandra Berlina, *Poetics Today* 36, no. 3 (2015), 151–74, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-3160709> and Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 91–99.
- 19 On reading for tone and inscrutability in Asian American literature, see Sunny Xiang, *Tonal Intelligence: The Aesthetics of Asian Inscrutability During the Long Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).
- 20 Carol Martin, "Brecht, Feminism, and Chinese Theater," *TDR* 43, no. 4 (1999), 77–85.
- 21 "M Butterfly: An interview with David Henry Hwang," David Henry Hwang and John Louis DiGaetani, *TDR* 33, no. 3 (1988), 141–53, 14 *M Butterfly: An interview with David Henry Hwang*, David Henry Hwang and John Louis DiGaetani, *TDR* (1988) 33, no. 3, 141–53, 148.
- 22 "M Butterfly: An interview with David Henry Hwang," David Henry Hwang and John Louis DiGaetani, *TDR* 33, no. 3 (1988), 141–53, 152–3.
- 23 Chen, Tina, "Betrayed into Motion: The Seduction of Narrative Desire in *M. Butterfly*," *Critical Mass: A Journal of Asian American Cultural Criticism* 1, no. 2 (1994), 129–54.
- 24 For an extended reading of the phallus in the play, see Eng. On the play's use of phallic humor, John S. Bak describes the play as "bursting with phallic references. Some are obvious and meant to generate a chuckle or two; some are obscure but fuel the play's sociopolitical commentary. Together they work to overexpose the phallus in one way precisely to draw attention away from it in another." (72) Bak, John S, "Long Dong and Other Phallic Tropes in Hwang's 'M. Butterfly.'" *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 21, no. 3 (Fall, 2009), 71–83.
- 25 William Cheng, "Taking Back the Laugh: Comedic Alibis, Funny Fails," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017), 528–49,
- 26 "dissonance, n." OED Online. June 2021. Oxford University Press. www.oed.com/view/Entry/55540?redirectedFrom=dissonance (Accessed July 29, 2021).
- 27 I'm reminded here of a footnote in Sianne Ngai and Lauren Berlant's "Comedy Has Issues": "this is partly why teaching is so close to slapstick; language is always on the edge of fumbling, as real-time improvisation takes place in the land of the awkward," Sianne Ngai and Lauren Berlant, "Comedy Has Issues," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017), 233–246, 246, n. 33.

INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST PLEASURE AND THE BIND OF HETERONORMATIVITY IN *KILLING EVE*

Lynn Fujiwara

Viewers of BBC America's *Killing Eve* enjoy the series for its women-led spy thriller drama, homoerotic cat-and-mouse adventure where a brutal Russian assassin plays through outrageous costumes, gorgeous couture fashion, brutal yet fascinating murders, and the quirky, nerdy, awkward Asian British-American spy who becomes obsessed with catching her. Heralded for showcasing three women leads, Sandra Oh as Eve Polastri the clumsy nerdy MI6 agent, Jodie Comer as the cold sadistic assassin Villanelle, and Fiona Shaw as Carolyn Martin the complex hyper-intellectual, sexually liberated, unemotional head of the MI6 Russian unit. At the time of this writing, the cast over three aired seasons has varied with Women of Color assistants, young male underlings who end up dead or seriously injured, and buffoonish white male executive types that are exposed for their corruption and usually gruesomely killed by Villanelle. The seasons travel all over Europe, primarily through Villanelle's assigned hits. The central narrative arc that holds viewers is the desire to see if Villanelle and Eve hook up and have a relationship beyond the chase.

Early commentary about *Killing Eve* was preoccupied with the underlying queer narrative teased through innuendo and suggestion between the two main characters.¹ So much focus was placed on Oh's interview statement with *Gay Times* about whether the two women characters were going to get together and consummate their relationship after season 1, "You guys are tricky because you want to make it into something . . . but it just isn't."² This comment led to accusations of queer-baiting, and subsequent analysis on the queer elements and features of the show. By the end of season three, the queerness of *Killing Eve* is clear. There's no question of Villanelle's sexuality as it intertwines with her extravagant lavish assassin's budget; she enjoys expensive designer clothing, personally crafted perfumes, an endless supply of expensive champagne, and stylish European flats. Several subplots encompass ex-girlfriends, flamboyant escapades with women and men lovers, as she often enjoys *ménage-à-trois*, and has no problem telling Eve she loves her and wants her. To nearly all supporting characters Eve's desire for Villanelle is evident, yet Eve clings to her passionless heteronormative marriage to teacher Niko (a Polish immigrant teaching in London, played by Owen McDonnell). Eve has moments of intimacy with Villanelle, but she cannot accept her feelings for Villanelle, and instead her obsession wreaks havoc on all those

close to her. I contend that *Killing Eve*, though liberatory and innovative in counter-narratives of female power, perpetuates an Asian American bind of heteronormativity. Through an intersectional examination of Sandra Oh's character, *Killing Eve* reinforces the bind of heteronormativity, by organizing Eve's character development around her sexuality and quest for normativity. While few have discussed the racialization of an Asian American living in England, reading *Killing Eve* through a queer Asian American feminist framework highlights the use of race, gender, and sexuality as narratives that so effortlessly reproduce the bind of heteronormativity.

I draw from two primary conceptualizations as I work my way through this argument. In Gayatri Gopinath's *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, she situates the framework *Impossible Desires* at the intersection of queer and feminist scholarship, challenging the notion that these fields of inquiry are necessarily distinct, separate, and incommensurate (Gopinath 2005, 16). In the past two decades we have seen an emergence of Asian American queer studies that has pushed the field,³ yet queer critique has largely remained distinct in Asian American feminist dialogues. Likewise, in Celine Parreñas Shimizu's *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*, she calls for a politically productive perversity as a resistant strategy for the hypersexualized bind of representation of Asian/American women (Shimizu 2007). In this essay I engage the challenge noted by Gopinath to bring together queer of color and Asian American feminist frameworks to examine assumed heteronormativity and the impossibility of Asian American queer desire.

For Asian American viewers,⁴ the enjoyment of *Killing Eve* came from seeing Sandra Oh in a leading role that gave her substance and complexity. Although at times her role required her to act out stereotypical representations of the socially awkward geeky Asian, Asian Americans celebrated over social media with Sandra Oh's Golden Globe win after the first season, where she thanked her parents in Korean and gave them a customary bow in her acceptance speech.⁵ As I viewed each season of *Killing Eve* with anticipation and hope for more Asian American narrative within the British context, I ruminated Rubia Tapia's question "when is feminist pleasure feminist precisely because of how it engages with, and not necessarily in a challenging way, racial logics, racial knowing?" (Tapia 2011). An examination of *Killing Eve* provides an opportune moment to consider the challenge of the intersection of Asian American feminist empowerment with Asian American queer desire.

Killing Eve is a narrative that constructs the tensions between queerness and heteronormativity as intertwined with violence, power, and the forbidden. Through my discussion of queer desire, I examine the interconnection between heteronormativity and racialized gendered constructions of the normative Asian woman character, who struggles with the moral impulse to "be normal" and resists her desire for a woman who is a ruthless assassin. I examine the bind of queer impossibility in *Killing Eve* through Shimizu's framework of politically productive perversity that builds upon a queer feminist analysis that challenges assumed racialized, gendered, and sexual normativities. The advancement of this framework re-centers Gopinath's argument of the "erotics of power," that are at play in both the representations, and how we critique them. In her discussion of South Asian feminist assumptions of heterosexuality of the female diasporic and female nationalist subject, Gopinath calls for the full interrogation of heterosexuality as a structuring mechanism of both state and diasporic nationalisms, making clear the indispensability of queer critique (Gopinath 2005, 10). Thinking about the cultural construction of Eve as a Korean diasporic subject through an intersectional examination that centers race and sexuality through assumed heteronormativity, allows for a more complex reading of feminist possibilities contradicted by queer impossibility.

The intersectional imperative in this examination of *Killing Eve* is the quest to put in application the integrated theorization of gender, race, and queer subjectivities. In Ruby Tapia's com-

plex feminist analysis of race, gender, and motherhood presented in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* series of white woman superhero vengeance and virtuous violence, she states

I *am* interested in and committed to asking how our theorizations of resistant practices of imagined, perhaps real, violence that occur in, or are inspired by, images can be accountable to the intersectional perspective from which feminist critics aspire to read culture.

(*Tapia 2011, 146*)

The violence in *Killing Eve* works as both a thirst for power as well as the fulfillment of sexual desire. Drawing from Tapia's formulation of feminist pleasure as accountable to reading violent images through intersectional perspectives, *Killing Eve* provides promising constructions of feminist power yet is hindered with the bind of racialized Asian American heteronormativity. Through this critical intersectional reading of *Killing Eve*, I argue that while the series elicits feminist viewing pleasure, the Asian American heteronormative tension subverts the resistant possibilities for Asian American queer desire.

40.1 Feminist pleasure through an intersectional reading of *Killing Eve*

This intersectional reading of *Killing Eve* focuses on the bind of Asian American heteronormativity and the queering of Eve through violence, power, and sexual desire. Beginning in 2018, *Killing Eve* has aired for three seasons (at the time of this writing). The fourth and final season aired in 2022 (delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Sandra Oh (Asian Canadian-American) plays Eve Polastri, a Korean American MI6 British intelligence agent. She is quirky, nerdy, hyper-cerebral, socially awkward, and clumsy, a female version of the Asian geek model minority. According to the storyline, Eve was born in London but grew up in Connecticut, then moved back to London. Eve is married to a Polish teacher Niko Polastri in a passionless, loving but boring, safe marriage. At first she is an assistant, but soon becomes the lead on a case to find the assassin Oksana Vorontsova, also better known as Villanelle, played by Jodie Comer.

The narrative of sexual desire is at the heart of Eve Polastri's character development. We are quickly in tune with Eve and Niko's passionless marriage. In the pilot episode, Eve immediately becomes obsessive about understanding the psychology of the woman assassin Villanelle. In a bedtime scene, Eve puts her laptop away turns off the lights and lays down facing away from Niko. Eve quickly turns the light back on, turns to Niko and says mundanely "Do you want to have sex?" "Sure," he says. Eve initiates caressing and kissing, then pops her head up and talks about the murder case. Niko compliantly engages in conversation about the case, then Eve quickly turns the light out, says "Good night" and lays facing away. Eve jumps back up, "Sorry ... sex!" turns the light back on, turns to Niko and he says, "I'm actually knackered," and Eve responds, "Oh good ... okay." She turns the light back off, they settle to go to sleep, and then in the dark Eve makes another comment in dry comedic fashion about the murder case.

Through the first season we see a transformation of Eve's character development as the obsession between Eve and Villanelle emerges. The first sign of the convergence of Eve's obsession with sexual desire is made by dear friend and co-worker Bill, who says to Eve, "I'm ... sorry if your husband is boring you too, but that doesn't give you an excuse to go rogue at work" (episode 1, 32:21). Eve and Villanelle's first encounter in the first episode is in a hospital bathroom, though Eve does not know yet that Villanelle is the assassin who is there to kill the woman Eve is protecting. They have a brief exchange, and Villanelle brutally murders the witness Eve is there

to protect, leaving behind a bloodbath. Once they figure out that Villanelle was the woman in the hospital bathroom, Eve's obsession grows in intensity.

Once Villanelle learns that Eve Polastri, the woman she saw in the bathroom is the agent trying to catch her, she begins to taunt Eve. Eve becomes more distant from her husband Niko, obsessed with her job, incapable of having a focused conversation with him. Yet, she is able to recount subtle and nuanced details of Villanelle's features from their brief encounter in the hospital bathroom. Trying to describe her features to a forensic sketch artist (yet we don't know that is who she is talking to until she finishes describing her and the camera pans completely to the other side of her that brings the forensic sketch artist into frame), she begins with a more matter of fact tone, but by the end is speaking more slowly and retrospectively as if lost in thought about Villanelle. In a dark room with a circular up-close panning of Eve's face she recounts:

Her hair is dark blonde, maybe honey. It was tied back. She was slim. About 25–26. She had very delicate features. Her eyes are sort of catlike, wide but alert. Her lips are full, she has a long neck, and high cheekbones. [noticeable reflective pause and Oh's expression turns more serious than matter-of-fact, and she speaks slower and softer]. She had a lost look in her eye that was both direct and also chilling. She's totally focused yet almost entirely inaccessible.

(Season 1, episode 3, 0:29)

After she is done with her description the forensic artist asks in a comedic moment, "Uhhh so is that like a square face or an oval face." Bill looks at Eve raising eyebrows and suggestively nodding, indicating to viewers, that Eve has perhaps more of an obsession with Villanelle beyond her work assignment. Eve and Bill head to Berlin to investigate Villanelle's latest brutal murder, and Villanelle starts to stalk Eve. Close on Villanelle's trail, she murders Eve's dear friend Bill as Eve is approaching him on a crowded dance floor. This sends Eve reeling, traumatized, completely inaccessible to Niko, annoyed by his concern and presence, and more determined than ever to catch Villanelle.

The suggestion of Eve's growing desires for Villanelle are juxtaposed with mundane house scenes and interactions with husband Niko. At this point Eve's Asian American identity seems irrelevant to the story line, yet she is racialized as a quirky nerdy assimilated Asian American woman entangled in interracial relationships with white Europeans. The seeming irrelevance of who she desires and the racial gendered dynamics as the object of desire by a white man and a white woman, is masked through a suspenseful naiveté model-minority politics of someone just trying to do her job, and save the world from the bad guys killing people. The diverse cast of supporting characters, frames Eve's interracial desires as liberal multiculturalism, though she only ever has sex with white people, while Villanelle has sexual encounters with a racial, gendered, and sexual diversity of folks. The homoeroticism intensifies from Villanelle holding a knife to Eve's chest in a heavy breathing close embrace, to Eve pushing a knife into Villanelle's gut while laying on Villanelle's bed for a first embrace. In nearly all instances, Eve is passive and submissive, while Villanelle charms and entices her, bringing out another side to the do-gooder assimilated wife and MI6 agent.

A scene where Eve's sensuality and desires for Villanelle move from work obsession to sexual desire occurs in her own home. Eve goes through her suitcase that was stolen by Villanelle in Berlin. After a forensic examination, they determine that Villanelle had replaced all of Eve's belongings with high-end designer fashion and perfume, perfectly choreographed for Eve's size and much more stylish than she could manage on her own. Eve looks through the clothes with amazement, takes out a gorgeous custom-made bottle of perfume called La Villanelle, smells

it, and puts it on her wrists and neck, smells the scent on her wrists long and deeply, literally wearing Villanelle. The slow seductive music starts in the background, establishing the ambiance of subdued yet growing desire. She pulls out designer black heels coordinated with a black and white tight-fitting gown. She puts it on with the shoes, looks in the mirror, pulls down her hair, the music starts to escalate in intensity, Eve caresses her body, feeling her ass, stomach, and chest in the designer dress. Then, in Eve fashion she fumbles the heels off of her feet, and heads downstairs with her glass of wine. Villanelle enters her house, and Eve still in the designer gown runs up the stairs, into the bathroom screaming for help. Villanelle kicks the bathroom door open, and Eve puts the toilet bowl brush in her face. They struggle, and fall into the bathtub, and Villanelle waterboards her in the bathtub, and screams, “I just want to have dinner with you ... OK!” The next scene shows Villanelle sitting at the dining room table, and Eve standing there shaking and soaked in her designer gown holding a plastic container of leftovers. Villanelle tells her to change her clothes, and says she won’t look. Eve starts to undress, Villanelle, never looking away gets up and unzips her gown and removes the straps, and removes the gown from Eve, and says “You have a very nice body.” Eve puts on the clothes hanging from the line.

They sit down to eat Niko’s shepherd’s pie, and have an intense conversation about Villanelle’s work. Things heat up when Eve asks Villanelle why she killed her friend Bill, and Villanelle’s response was “He was slowing you down,” then puts her hand on Eve’s. Eve goes to grab a knife, Villanelle pushes Eve up against the refrigerator, puts the knife at her chest, keeping the knife there at her chest, staring face to face. Villanelle leans toward Eve, who is standing there terrified and sniff’s her neck and says with sinister delight, “Are you wearing it?” They are interrupted with the arrival of Niko and his student friend. Villanelle leaves with the designer dress, pretending she was just there for some help, Eve is clearly shaky, disheveled, and teary eyed, and overly smiles at Niko and his friend, and Niko looks at her, knowing that Eve is masking major emotional upheaval (season 1, episode 5).

The final scene of the first season, when Eve and Villanelle acknowledge their attraction and desire for each other is often cited as the show’s most obvious queer-baiting scene. This time in Villanelle’s Paris apartment, Eve plans to kill her. Eve rummages through Villanelle’s stuff, guzzles foaming champagne, smashes bottles of champagne (the only contents in Villanelle’s mini fridge) all over her floor in a cathartic rage, when Villanelle shows up. Villanelle says, looking at all of her designer clothes strewn all over the floor, shimmying her shoulders, “Did you have a party or something?” Eve says angrily, “I have lost a husband, two jobs, and a best friend because of you.” Villanelle responds jokingly, “Yeah, but you got some really nice clothes out of it ... sooo.” She then sees Eve has a gun and asks “What are you going to do with that?” Eve tells her that she is going to kill her, and Villanelle says matter-of-factly, “No you’re not ... you like me too much.”

Eve plops down on Villanelle’s bed, sitting directly across from her, sighing heavily and confesses:

Eve: I think about you all the time. I think about what you’re wearing, what you are doing and who you are doing it with. I think about what friends you have. I think about what you eat before you work. What shampoo you use. What happened in your family. I think about your eyes and your mouth, and what you feel when you kill someone ... I think about what you have for breakfast. I just ... want to know everything.

Villanelle: I think about you too. I mean I masturbate about you all the time.

E: Okay, that ...

V: Too much?

E: No, It’s just I wasn’t expecting that.

V: So you trash my apartment because you like me so much.

E: I know it's not conventional ... What do you want? Honestly, don't be a dick.

V: Normal stuff, a nice life, cool flat, fun job. Someone to watch movies with.

Eve lays back on the bed plopping the gun down, "God I'm tired." Villanelle looking surprised, ventures over, takes the gun from the bed, and lays down next to her. Seductive music plays.

Villanelle: You found me.

Eve: Yes.

V: Well done.

E: Thank you.

E: Are you going to kill me?

V: [Shaking her head no.]

Eve: Promise?

V: Promise. [Puts the gun down on the floor next to the bed.]

V: [Turns onto her side, facing Eve.] Will you stay for a bit?

E: Sure. [Looking at each other.]

[Villanelle caresses Eve's hair and face.]

E: I've never done anything like this before

V: It's okay. [Scoots her body closer to her.]

[Eve puts a knife to Villanelle's stomach.]

V: Wow ... that's rude.

E: Yeah.

V: You can't.

[Eve stabs her.]

E: I can.

V: Ohhhh. [Villanelle whimpers.]

E: I can. [Climbs on top of her and straddles her and pushes the knife in deeper.]

V: [Looking up into Eve's eyes.] I really liked you. It hurts ... Don't pull it out.

E: [Looks remorseful, pulls it out.] V: [Screams.] What did I say?

E: [Panics, then wants to save her.]

E: Hold on, hold on, I got you, I got you. [Trying to put pressure on the wound, runs to the kitchen to get towels. We see blood everywhere.]

V: [Falls to the ground, then shoots at her.]

E: I need to help you.

E: Put that down ... I'm coming out ... I'm coming out ...

[Villanelle is gone.]

(season 1, episode 8)

While Villanelle's sexuality is no mystery, Eve's struggle over her desire for Villanelle gets intermeshed with Eve's discovery of her inner power. As a passive quirky Asian American, Villanelle's power as a brilliant, lethal, unflinching assassin is also attractive to Eve, and putting her in touch with her own inner rage and power. The plot lines that bring Eve's enlightenment of both her power and sexuality work to create an impossibility for Eve. Why can't she act out her sexual desire for Villanelle? The taboo left for viewers is a questioning about her quest for an idea of normativity given her well-assimilated life; is it because Villanelle is a woman or a psychopath, or both?

One could argue that Eve's racial identity is inconsequential to the character development through the first season. Although subtle, Eve's quirky social awkwardness, failure to grasp social

cues, extreme focus to details, and brainiac logic of trying to figure out Villanelle's psychology, constructs Eve as a naïve intelligence agent, dedicated to her job. While the racial construction does not center her character, her sexuality and sexual desires interconnects to her quest for autonomy, power, and violence. When she pushes Niko in a fit of anger, because he calls her out for her self-absorbed obsession with Villanelle, we see no remorse at the moment, just defiance, confidence, and power. No longer the mousy passive wife, or assistant, she determines the goals of her work, and the mission she is after.

The second season situates Eve's racial identity and her transition away from normativity becomes more into focus. We see a stronger integration of Asian diasporic representations that further situate Eve's Asian identity. The first Asian narrative occurs through the introduction of another assassin, who they call "the ghost." On their way to discovering the identity of another high-powered hit man, a subtheme of Asian service workers develops, bringing Eve's racial identity into stronger focus. Eve surmises that the person killing key people is someone who is unseen, like a service worker, someone who "is invisible ... it's the kind of woman people look at everyday, but never see." Someone who does not want to draw any attention to herself, with a medical background as all the murders are done quietly, unknowingly, and through carefully controlled medical substances that bring her victims little suffering. Eve speculates, someone "not white." She is interrupted by her annoying Oxford preppy, arrogant, obnoxious, sex-obsessed assistant who has the hots for her: "How do you know they are not white?" Eve retorts, "The fact that you just interrupted me is how I know they are not white" (season 2, episode 2). This is the first outward recognition that Eve is not white, but in addition, it is through Eve's cultural knowledge that she narrows down the profession and racial background of the assassin.

Eve figures out that the vicious killer is an Asian woman, a medical professional who has access to her victims posing as a service worker. She catches the ghost, a Korean immigrant woman while dropping her young children off at school. We see Eve following the Asian mom with her kids while pretending to talk to her own mother on the phone in Korean. Once the Ghost's children head toward the school, Eve speaks to her in Korean, with numerous rifle laser lights pointing at her, saying she can come with her peacefully or be shot dead in front of her children.

Most of the Asian characters in Asian diasporic settings are used for comedy. Eve's Asian identity reflects both difference as non-white, but also assimilation through class, education, and professionalization. In the climax of the second season, Eve believes she must rescue Villanelle from the narcissistic tech mogul sadist Aaron Peele. She disguises herself as a domestic worker, a launderer with bags of laundry and heads over to Peele's palazzo. When she gets to the front entrance, she speaks to the door guards in Korean to emphasize her status as a laborer. After Villanelle kills Aaron Peele and they try to escape from his guards, the Korean domestic worker comes in comedic use as they leave. Villanelle says to the two guards in a heightened California valley-girls accent, "Come on ... hurry up (*to Eve*). I'm borrowing the maid to carry my shopping, tell Mrs. Leary Aaron is in the dining room and he does not want to be disturbed." Snapping her fingers and waving her hands: "Come on." Eve says to Villanelle under her breath as they walk away, "You are such an asshole," and Villanelle says humorously "It is not my fault you are dressed as a maid; you look cute by the way" (season 2, episode 8).

The Korean diaspora service economy is heightened in season three that plays out in Eve's character development as her eagerness for normativity falls further out of her reach.

Eve's racial background is contextualized through satirical motifs of the Korean market and the Korean restaurant. The first time we see Eve in season three she is depressed, slumped over, wincing in pain as she is recovering from her gunshot wound (shot by Villanelle at the end of season two), and in the Korean market deciding on the vast array of Korean instant noodles.

The camera angle scans the shelves of endless choices of instant noodle packages, and Eve, looking dazed, reading packages, then tossing a variety of instant noodles into her handle basket. As she goes to check out, the cashier is a 20-something Korean immigrant woman, more excited to gossip with her co-worker in Korean about romance, than tend to Eve as a customer. The cashier mentions Rome, where Eve was shot and left by Villanelle, and she sneers in annoyance, but stays silent. In a new form of comedic relief, the Korean narratives juxtapose Eve's obsession with Villanelle, and unrelenting desires for her, with the idea of jovial, light-heartedness of Korean diasporic working-class life in England.

Eve, down and out, works in the kitchen of a Korean restaurant, primarily making dumplings or carving up large meat parts. In nearly every scene of the restaurant, we see Eve eavesdropping on two male co-workers talking in Korean about their romantic prospects. One guy appears to be a poor sap who "can't get the girl," but thinks he's on the brink of making progress. This constantly annoys Eve, until she finally explodes on the guy when he's talking about the woman who he's having troubles with and interrupts in English,

She's lying. Okay? She's lying when she said she had work the next day, when she saw her mom, she was lying when she had the flu ... [guy starts crying]. You're not even crying because of her, you're crying because you feel stupid, because you were stupid.
(season 3, episode 1)

Here it is clear that Eve is projecting on her own feelings of stupidity, resulting in the loss of her previous safe, consistent, and predictable heteronormative life with Niko, but still outwardly denying her desires and love for Villanelle. Eve's short-lived working-class Korean restaurant job making dumplings and chopping meat in the kitchen only lasts through the first episode of season three. She is immediately swept back into unofficial spy work searching for the murderer who killed her dear friend Kenny at the end of the first episode of season three. The establishment of Eve in the Korean kitchen situates her within the larger Korean diasporic racial milieu and global economy. Seeing Eve finding solace as a laborer among the unassimilated migrant community provides another layer of her Korean racialized identity and class juxtaposition. This narrative provides tension between her racial unassimilability while still clinging to heteronormativity.

40.2 The bind of heteronormativity and queer sex by proxy

The bind of heteronormativity is most striking in scenes of queer sex by proxy. By "queer sex by proxy" I mean scenes where Eve is having sex with men while emotionally desiring Villanelle or connected with Villanelle through a version of "phone sex" (while physically with a man). I find Celine Parreñas Shimizu's framework of the bind of representation and hypersexuality as a racialized performance helpful in analyzing queer sex by proxy as both a form of *politically productive perversity*, as well as a continued bind of heteronormativity. Politically productive perversity for Shimizu "involves identifying with 'bad' images, or working to establish a different identity along with established sexual images so as to expand racial agendas beyond the need to establish normalcy and standardization" (Shimizu 2007, 21). Although Shimizu focuses their analysis on dominant hypersexual images of Asian women that need reclaiming and a (re) reading within the vein of resistance and pleasure, here I see Eve's early construction as asexual, passionless automaton with husband Niko as the bind of heteronormativity. Eve's desires for Villanelle represents a nonnormative racialized construction that can only be realized through sex with white men. In the second season, Eve's desires for Villanelle continue to be constructed as impossible, as she clings to a heteronormative life with Niko.

Niko, fed up with Eve's secrets and dangerous line of work, and aware of her attraction and desires for Villanelle leaves Eve after a heated night of sex. The passionate sado-masochistic sex scene with Niko occurs on a dark stormy night where Eve senses Villanelle's presence, as Villanelle watches Eve get off on Niko's sexual domination longingly through the window. However, the next morning, with aggression, Niko acknowledges Eve's hunger for power, fear, passion, and rage. As he leaves Eve says, "Niko please, let's talk, don't leave me alone." Knowing full well Eve is having some sort of engagement with Villanelle says, "You're not alone are you?" (season 2, episode 6). Niko moves out into his co-worker Gemma's house, who Eve can see is pining for Niko, though Niko only sees her as a platonic friend.

In the most direct queer sex by proxy between Eve and Villanelle, Eve is actually listening to Villanelle through a surveillance earpiece. Eve and Villanelle have sex through proxy with Eve's annoying assistant Hugo. Villanelle lays down in bed, and begins talking to Eve through the surveillance mic. Eve is up listening, while Hugo is asleep in the bed right behind her. Villanelle says to Eve in a soft tone "What are you doing?" then breathes heavily. "Are you going to listen all night?" "Are you having fun in Rome?" breathing heavily. "You should let yourself go once in a while." She takes along deep breath, and Eve tilts her head back. "I can help you." Eve is listening, titillated, and looks behind her at the sleeping Hugo, while Villanelle continues to breathe heavily. Eve walks over to the bed looking seductive, takes off her pants, and removes the blankets. Hugo says "What are you doing ... I thought you'd never ask." Eve says, "Don't talk."

The next morning, Villanelle, waking up, breathing heavily, says "Morning." Eve's eyes open, looking serene and happy. Villanelle asks "Did you sleep well?" Eve rolls over a bit, looking content and cozy, then next to her Hugo rises, and says "Hey" all smiley. Eve opens her eyes, looks annoyed, and says "Hey" in a dead flat voice. "Well that was a surprise ... I actually had fun." Eve says, "Look I really don't need to talk about this." Hugo responds, "I think we do." Instead, Eve goes back to her emotionless, robotic supervisor, and orders "Go get us coffee, we have work to do." Hugo, looking at Eve getting back to the computer, looking annoyed, sees Eve take the earpiece out of her ear, realizing she was having "phone" sex with Villanelle while with him. He says, "I'll go get some coffee then ... and oh ... thanks for the threesome." Eve just looks ahead, with a blank uncaring look. Hugo returns with the coffee, and tries to antagonize Eve for a reaction, but she has no interest in him. He says, "I'll let you get back to your girlfriend" (season 2, episode 7).

This queer sex by proxy is situated within a nuanced construction of Eve's character, and not necessarily social or cultural stigma. Everyone around Eve and Villanelle, know they have an attraction and desire for each other. Other characters comment on their relationship and desires as matter-of-factly, and for the most part there is little homophobic innuendo. Rather, the impossibility is all Eve's. Her quest for normalcy, is defined by an assimilationist construction of normative assumptions of "goodness." Thus, everyone in the entire show is sexually liberated except Eve. Even Niko accepts that Eve is attracted to and wants Villanelle, and knows that he cannot satisfy her. Eve's bind of heteronormativity is blurred by the confusion of Villanelle as a gorgeous woman who clearly desires Eve, and Villanelle who is a psychopathic murderer. Yet, she loves Villanelle, and she trusts that she would not kill her, because she knows that Villanelle loves her.

Yet the question remains, why not just have sex? They have ample opportunities, and Eve was clearly able to actualize her sexual desires through Hugo, even though it was Villanelle she was screwing emotionally and mentally. Hugo's anger that he had just been used so Eve could have sex with Villanelle confirms that Eve's reticence is not about staying faithful to Niko, but rather a fear or barrier to queer sex with Villanelle directly. This bind of impossibility works and makes sense precisely because of her Asian American identity. Eve's ability to go back to her cold, robotic, work-obsessed supervisor role and ice out Hugo as nothing more than a pesky

annoyance, who she just happened to use to have sex with her “girlfriend,” because she can’t seem to do it herself comes together through the construction of Eve’s Asian American heteronormative professionalized personality quirks that she uses to mask her deep sexual desires and growing love for Villanelle.

40.3 Impossible desires

Gayatri Gopinath frames the notion of impossibility “as a way of signaling the unthinkability of a queer female subject position within various mappings of nation and diaspora” (Gopinath 2005, 15). While Gopinath examines South Asian and South Asian diasporic cultural constructions of queer impossibility and or unimaginability, in *Killing Eve* a queer narrative is central to the construction of Eve’s character development. However, this queer narrative is centered and encased in the bind of heteronormativity. We leave season one with a tender moment, of both Eve and Villanelle laying on the bed together, Eve saying “I’ve never done anything like this before” (season 1, episode 8) before putting her knife to Villanelle’s stomach and stabbing her. In nearly every scene of intimacy, the viewer is given hope that Eve will act on her desires and sexual intimacy will ensue. But rather, tender moments are almost always shaped by sexual tension with Eve’s apprehension, and then an eruption of violence that ends their tender moment.

At the end of the second season, both Villanelle and Eve are instructed by their handlers/supervisors that they must leave Rome immediately. They both refuse to abandon the other. Like the end of the first season, the second season ends with one causing injury to the other. After escaping from the Twelve in Rome, Eve refuses to leave and start a life with Villanelle. After a heated argument in the Colosseum ruins Eve states “I’m going home ... I’ve got to go home” (season 2, episode 8). In this moment of impossibility, Eve’s declaration that she needs to “go home,” implies that she needs to go home to repair and resume her life with Niko. That although she just had sex (by proxy) with Villanelle the night before, her desire for Villanelle is impossible because Villanelle is a killer, and not someone she can have a “normal” life with. In spite of Eve’s love and care for Villanelle that we see through her refusal to leave without her, and she abandoned her assistant Hugo bleeding on the ground to “save” Villanelle, a vision of a future life together does not promise normality.

The final scene of season three is on the London Bridge overlooking the water. Arguing about who killed Dasha (Villanelle’s current handler who tried to kill Niko), Villanelle says, “Then I guess we both did ... isn’t that romantic?” Eve responds, “You know the only people who would think that are? ... us.” Villanelle confesses to Eve that she doesn’t want to be an assassin anymore, that she doesn’t want any part of the life she has been living. Eve, looking at the normal passersby, says, “What’s happened to us? I use to be like them.” Villanelle says comedically, “What? Badly dressed? ... You were never like them, you only thought you were.” Eve insists, “NO, I had a life, I had a husband, and a house, and a chicken.” Villanelle asks, “You still want that stuff?” Eve confesses “When I try and think of my future I just see your face over and over again.” Villanelle affectionately says, “It is a very beautiful face ... did I ruin your life? ... do you think I’m a monster?” Eve says honestly, “You’re so many things ... I think we all have monsters inside of us ... just that most people manage to keep them hidden.”

Villanelle: I think my monster encourages your monster ... right?

Eve: I think I wanted it to ... Help me ... help me make it stop.

Villanelle: So no more tea dances ... If that is really what you want it is not that difficult.

Eve: Are you going to tell me to jump?

Villanelle: No, of course not ... you would die if you jumped, it is easier than that.

Eve: If only that were true.

Villanelle: Stand up straight ... stand up straight and look at me. Now turn around and face the other way. I'll turn this way ... [Eve not turning] Have you turned? I can't see you.

Eve: Now what?

Villanelle: Now we walk and we never look back.

Eve: But ... I ... I ...

Villanelle: Don't turn ... just walk.

(season 3, episode 8)

Once they stand face to face the music starts the camera is close up, and we see them looking into each other's eyes. When Villanelle turns, Eve does not, the camera pans out to show Eve standing looking at Villanelle's back. Then when Villanelle prompts her to turn she does. They caress their backs to each other, both crying from the pain of ending their relationship. The music starts to play, and they begin to walk, the camera switches back and forth as we see the pain on both of their faces as they walk without looking back. The camera pans out, and we see Eve stop, then Villanelle stops, and Eve looks back. The audience is left wondering are they going to stay together, or continue on their separate ways. This final scene recoils of the bind of heteronormativity as Eve expresses her desires of a future with Villanelle, but pleads to make her desires stop. Eve goes so far to acknowledge that they are the same, shedding her moral authority over Villanelle's life as a ruthless assassin. What is the point of impossibility within the larger narrative? Eve's remorse for the loss of the heteronormative life she used to have is rebutted by Villanelle's observation that that was not Eve's authentic self. She was living a model-minority lie, established through social norms and expectations, but Villanelle helped Eve find her monster, her true feelings and desires. But Eve still can't accept a life with Villanelle. That is still impossible. There is little impeding their hooking up, if just for a night, yet the impossibility they face in this moment is not actualized through a violent interruption, rather it is as simple as walking away from each other.

The narrative of impossibility and the bind of heteronormativity is loosened once Niko no longer offers a life of normativity. Impaled by a pitchfork in a long-term hospital facility, and no longer wanting to have anything to do with Eve, Niko releases Eve's clutch to her imagined normal life. Eve seems more accepting of Villanelle's violent murderous past, recognizing her own inner demons. Eve's racial identity as a Korean diasporic subject living in London converged with her confrontation of inner rage, power, and violence. The backdrop of working-class Korean immigrant workers in the global economy juxtaposed her class mobility, education, and assimilation into Britain's national security state. Yet her desire for Villanelle throws her order into chaos because she clings to heteronormativity. This intersectional construction of an Asian-British-American woman, at first more of a sexual automaton, robotic in her calculated brilliance to sniff out women assassins, is awakened by her desires for the powerful yet vulnerable queer assassin who deeply loves and desires her. Yet the bind of heteronormativity supersedes the possibility for love and sexual fulfillment through model-minority themes of normalcy, morality, and sacrifice, veiling the bind of heteronormativity in this intersectional feminist pleasure of violence and impossibility.

Notes

- 1 Audrey Jane Black, "Pleasure, power, and pathology-between two worlds: Killing Eve's queer/feminist post-Cold War appraisal," *Feminist Media Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1856909>; Eduarda De Carli and Elaine Barros Indrusiak, "The Fall of Eve: The Frailty of Moral Alignment in

- Killing Eve*,” *Dossier/Artigo* 13(13), 6, 2020; Jill Gutowitz, “Killing Eve’s Queer Storyline is Looking More and More Like a Marketing Ploy,” *Vice*, June 6, 2019, www.vice.com/en/article/d3nw9x/fans-accuse-killing-eve-sandra-oh-of-queerbaiting-after-season-2-finale.
- 2 Ash Percival, “Killing Eve Accused of Queerbaiting After Sandra Oh Dismisses Show’s Lesbian Undertones,” *Huffington Post*, June 6, 2019. www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/killing-eve-sandra-oh-queerbaiting_uk_5cf9087ae4b0e3e3df160b9b.
 - 3 Important work that centrally informs my analysis of heteronormativity include: Cathy Cohen’s “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics” (1997), David L. Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (2001), Rod Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (2003), Martin Manalansan’s *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (2003), Chandan Reddy’s “Asian Diasporas, Neoliberalism, and the Family” (2005), Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalisms in Queer Times* (2007), Grace M. Cho’s *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (2008), Gina K. Velasco’s *Queering the Global Filipina Body: Contested Nationalisms in the Filipina/o Diaspora* (2020).
 - 4 I realize Sandra Oh is a Canadian American actress, my examination is through an Asian American feminist framing.
 - 5 This YouTube clip of Sandra Oh’s speech went viral across Asian America Twitter and Facebook: www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmwTAKIgbTQ. It was featured on Facebook groups such as “Asians Today: Re-Imagining Asians Throughout the World,” “Asians NOW!-Asian, Asian American, and Asian Diaspora Empowerment.” On Twitter, we saw the hashtags #SandraOH and #GoldenGlobes.

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“WE COME WEST AND RUTH WENT EAST”

Musings on Sherley Anne Williams’s “Meditations on History”

Ann duCille

Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth—and made of that process a high art—remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often these have betrayed us. I loved history as a child, until some clear-eyed young Negro pointed out, quite rightly, that there was no place in the American past I could go and be free.

—*Sherley Anne Williams, author’s note to Dessa Rose, 1986*

I understand the sentiment and the author’s sense of loss and betrayal. I, too, loved history in my callow youth, before I came to know its deceits, distortions, silences, and omissions—before I came to countenance my own absence and erasure. And I am, at least in some measure, indebted to writers like Sherley Anne Williams for the awakening, for the understanding of who I am as a historical subject and where—and whom—I come from as an African American woman.

Feminist concepts such as intersectionality have been critical to my understanding of self in a world in which I am always and forever “other” or, as I have long insisted, we ought to say, “othered.” Intersectionality proves its value as an analytical tool for interrogating how overlapping aspects of identity—race, class, gender, age, sexual orientation—and interlocking systems of power—patriarchy, law enforcement, courts, churches, schools, housing, healthcare, media—affect the human conditions of people of color. But long before Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in its current popular usage, Black women writers were exposing in print the interconnectedness of oppressive systems. This interconnectedness or “intersectionality,” as Crenshaw herself readily acknowledges, has its antecedents in the work, words, and wisdom of Black women writers, artists, activists, and orators like Maria Stewart, Frances Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, and scores of other women of color, known and unnamed. It is of course the subject *par excellence* of slave narratives like Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861) and of so-called “neo-slave narratives,” more recent reflections on the past or what Williams has so brilliantly called “Meditations on History.” Indeed, I can think of no finer fictive interrogation of the ways in which interlocking systems of power and oppression have conspired historically to contain and control the lives of Black women than Williams’s short story, “Meditations,” and the novel it gave birth to, *Dessa Rose* (1986).

Although our paths nearly crossed in Providence in the early 1970s and we would become colleagues and friends at the University of California at San Diego in the mid-1990s, I first met Sherley Anne Williams through her words, initially the *Peacock Poems*, which was nominated for the National Book Award in 1976. I have read and reread those poems so many times over the past 45 years that my copy finally disintegrated in my hands. But what captured me even more and holds me still is Williams's miraculous short story, "Meditations on History," which first appeared in Mary Helen Washington's groundbreaking anthology, *Midnight Birds: Stories of Contemporary Black Women Writers*, published in 1980 at a time when there were remarkably few written records available that attempted to tell the truths of Black women's lives. As Washington writes of "Meditations," which would become the novel *Dessa Rose*, Williams "reaches far back into the black woman's history as slave for patterns and symbols to rename her experience" (xxii).

Williams and other Black women writers who take the female slave and her descendants as their subjects—Margaret Walker (*Jubilee*, 1966), Gayl Jones (*Corregidora*, 1975), Barbara Chase-Riboud (*Sally Hemings*, 1979), Toni Morrison (*Beloved*, 1987)—trace the very foundations of feminism and constructs like intersectionality to these Black women's daily lives and the double consciousness of being inextricably Black and female. The hard labors these women performed in multiple spheres earned them what Washington calls an "ironic equality" (xxii). They worked the public planes of the plantation like men, exempt from patriarchal protection and the genteel courtesies of white womanhood, even as they also labored in the private quarters to support their own households and communities. In the process—wherever, whenever, however possible—they also plotted to subvert the power structure that enslaved them and annulled their gender at the same time that it exploited their sex. Survival was itself a subversive act, but for Black women like Williams's protagonist—Odessa in "Meditations," Dessa in the novel—who aids and abets a coffee uprising, killing a slave trader in the process, by any means necessary also included raising a fist for freedom.

Odessa, whom we get to know better as the title character of Williams's fuller rendering, *Dessa Rose*, is, when we first meet her, a young woman in love and pregnant with the child of a fellow slave named Kaine. Kaine loves her passionately but wants her to abort this fetus that would be born a slave, who would not be *their* child. Odessa's first act of independent Black female rebellion is to refuse the abortifacients or any of the other forms of birth control the women routinely practice, with the aid of an older slave called Aunt Lefonia, in order not to give birth to chattel, thus secretly stunting the plantation's population growth and subverting the breeding rituals that were a basic part of the South's domestic economy. Dessa's second act of insurrection is to attack Massa for killing Kaine, an attack for which she is brutally flagellated across her lower extremities and private parts, where the ruts left by the lashes of the whip will not so readily be seen, negatively affecting her market value. She is then placed on the auction block and sold to slave traders, leaving her with only the memory of her great, impossible, dead love. Describing the young couple's intimate relationship, Williams writes:

They had seldom loved at night; the realization was like a fist in her stomach. Nighttime was for holding, for simple caresses that eased tired limbs, for sleep. Winter Saturdays they had loved in the evenings after dark had shortened the gray afternoons into chilly blackness, lighted by the flame on the fire-half, warmed by the heat their bodies made. They had had only the one winter of love; and the mornings. Memories of that fierce loving, muffled by the dense blackness before dawn, flooded her, bringing quick heat to her face.

(Williams 1986, 48)

In both "Meditations" and *Dessa Rose*, Williams offers a tender yet unromanticized portrait of intimacy and impossibility in the slave quarters not found in the official record—certainly not from the slave woman's point of view. Washington rightly labels Odessa an activist, though, by the customs and codes of the corrupt power structure she rebels against, she is of course a criminal—a "raging nigger bitch"—justly sentenced to hang when she and all but three of the other insurgents are captured or killed in a "fierce gun battle" that also wounded five and killed two members of the sheriff's posse pursuing them (Williams 1980, 220). Only her pregnancy—the property she is carrying in her womb—"for reasons of economy,"¹ saves Odessa from immediate disposal and allows her to live long enough to serve not only as a reproductive vessel but also as a research specimen for a Yankee scholar who has come South to study the ways of the Negro in captivity.

Adam Nehemiah, the pompous white writer interviewing Odessa as raw material for his self-described but as-yet-unwritten "*magnum opus*," *The Roots of Slave Rebellion and the Means of Eradicating Them* (sequel to his earlier tome, *The Complete Guide for Competent Masters in Dealing with Slaves and Other Dependents*), calls his captive subject "she-devil," "devil woman," "wench," "pickaninny," "savage," and "darky." "As defined by this white man, she is foreign, different, inferior, non-white, and non-male," Washington writes. "We finish this story, however, convinced of *her* power, not his" (xxii). She is, in Nehemiah's view, "but a darky and a female at that" (Williams 1980, 225), yet she beats the white male linguist at his own game, demonstrating her humanity, not his, and the superior wit, wordsmithery, and resourcefulness of his research subjects, whose call-and-response plan of escape he mistakes for mere darky music. As Washington explains, "The slaves singing about 'the soul's gon ride that heavenly train' are speaking to one another in a code of deliverance, but the white writer hears only a plaintive harmonic hymn" (Williams 1980, 199).

Displaying what Williams so carefully establishes as his characteristic arrogance and blindness, Nehemiah writes in his research and interview notes for June 29, 1829, that he has passed on to Hughes, the sheriff on whose farm Odessa is being held in a root-cellar jail, the intelligence he believes he has cleverly managed to extract from the unsuspecting she-devil captive that her three renegade compatriots who escaped capture may be hiding out in "a place without whites," which he theorizes may be a maroon settlement, "an encampment of runaway slaves, somewhere nearby." He goes on to boast that, "much impressed with my theorizing," Hughes has invited him to join the posse setting out the next morning in pursuit of the renegades (Williams 1980, 239). Before leaving with the posse the next day, Nehemiah, the expert in all things Negro, takes note but thinks nothing of the plaintive nature of the particular song he hears a slave singing, a voice apart from "the usual morning serenade of Hughes' darkies" in its solemnity, he writes, because the sheriff "frowns upon the singing of any but the most lively airs." He "listened and finally managed to make out the words," although clearly not their meaning:

Tell me, sista tell me, brotha how long will it be?
Tell me, brotha tell me sista, how long will it be?
That a poor sinner got to suffer, suffer here?
Tell me, sista tell me brotha when my sould be free?
Tell me, oh, please tell me, when I be free
And the lawd calla me home?

He had no sooner caught the words, he says, and recognized Odessa as the soloist, when another voice, "lower and more mellow, took up the melody:"

Oh, it won't be long. Say, it won't be long
Poor sinner got to suffer here.
Soul's goin to heav'n, soul's gon ride that heav'nly train,
Cause the Lawd have called us home.

(241)

Hoping that Odessa's singing betokens a "reflective mood," Nehemiah looks forward to questioning her further when he gets back from hunting the renegades—a mission he and Hughes have unwittingly been led to by the slave girl's cunning misdirection. But, of course, when he and the rest of the posse return to the farm after a harrowing wild-goose chase through a thunderstorm, Odessa is long gone, liberated from her cell by the very fugitive slaves the posse was hunting and aided in her escape by Hughes's own presumptively loyal, devoted darky, Jemima. Offering a glimpse into the heroic lives of the real women behind the racist, head-ragged trope with which her character shares a name, Williams casts this Jemima in the image of the consummate Black trickster figure. Risking her own life to save another, Jemima willingly and willfully opened the door to the root-cellar jail and unlocked the captive's chains, cleverly covering up her complicity by assuming Odessa's place in the cellar and then, when the posse returns, effectively putting on her own one-woman coon show for Mas Hughes, hooping and howling about having been overpowered by a terrible, fearsome band of renegades that keeps increasing in number each time she tells the tall tale of her terrible trials.

Shocked that "she—*she* was so deep" as to give no hint of what or who was afoot, Nehemiah writes of Odessa's disappearance, "I could scream to think that even as we were out chasing shadows, the cunning devils were even then lying in wait to spirit her away" (246). "Meditations" ends at this point, with the pompous expert cursing himself and the slave girl gone from his grasp, without "even the smallest clue" (248). It is the reader's great, good fortune, however, that the saga continues in the novel *Dessa Rose*, where we learn that Nehemiah—or "Nemi," as Dessa takes to calling him in her own reflections on their interview sessions—never accepts or acknowledges the full extent to which he was duped and bested by a very pregnant colored wench, nearly nine months gone, and the three "niggers with whom [she] was in league in the uprising on the coffle" (246). However expert he considers himself, he is, like the slaveholders who rely on his *Guide*, oblivious to the underground slave community, which exists, as Washington notes, "physically and psychologically to subvert the slave system" (199). But, as we discover at the end of *Dessa Rose*, Nemi's failure of perception and his preoccupation with the one that got away will haunt him all the days of what becomes for him a mad man's miserable life, spent like a crazed Don Quixote tilting at windmills in the shape of a pregnant slave girl.

Even without the author's admission to being "outraged by a certain, critically acclaimed novel" (5), it would be impossible not to recognize the tale-told-to-an-idiot interview format Williams deploys parodically in "Meditations on History" and *Dessa Rose* as a slam against *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), William Styron's controversial, Pulitzer Prize-winning, as-told-to appropriation of the slave narrative genre. Whatever the two white writers' respective credentials, the implication is that Styron gets his captive subject as wrong as Adam Nehemiah gets his. Nehemiah, who fancies himself a linguist among the other talents he claims, believes that he is using his superior intellect and masterful command of the King's English to outsmart and extract information from an ignorant, illiterate darky. He bemoans and belittles the fact that, when Odessa can be persuaded to speak at all, she "answers questions in a random manner, a loquacious, round-about fashion" that, "to one of my habits," he says, "is exasperating to the point of fury" (Williams 1980, 225). Among the many things he does not understand about his research subject and her community, however, is *their* way with words, their grounding in oral

traditions traceable to their African roots, and the role that this orality has played in their survival in the so-called New World.

Nehemiah’s attempt to outwit Dessa in a war of words, then, is like a dilettante’s bringing a pocketknife to a gunfight with an expert marksman. Ashraf Rushdy rightly describes the interaction between the learned scholar and the ignorant slave as a contest between “an oppressive literacy and an emancipatory orality” (Rushdy 1993, 366). Nehemiah attempts to “read” and then write Odessa as a way of controlling her and her captive kind, but his “copious notes” about the she-devil are only self-revealing. That is, we learn a lot more about him through his own unseeing eyes and unhearing ears than we do about his captive subject for whom “changing words,” as they say, becomes a means of escape.

When Nehemiah tried at one point to treat his subject as an oracle, prompting her to speak of and for her fellow insurgents, she told him, “Onlest mind I be knowin is mines” (237). And, indeed, it is through her words rather than his appraisal that Nemi’s “darky and a female at that” comes alive to us as a historical figure so much larger than the system that would contain, diminish, and destroy her. This is the true intersectional and intertextual genius behind what Sherley Anne Williams accomplishes in “Meditations.” But her construction, “Meditations on History,” has meaning way beyond its use as the title of a single and singular short story. As she tells us in the author’s note to the novel, *Dessa Rose*—and “Meditations” before it—was inspired by two actual historical events, one of which Williams first read about in Angela Davis’s momentous essay “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” (an essential, foundationally intersectional critique of the myth of the Black matriarchy that appeared in *The Black Scholar* in 1971, written and published while Davis was incarcerated in the Marin County jail). “A pregnant black woman helped to lead an uprising of a coffle,” Williams explains of the first incident, citing Davis’s allusion to the case in “Reflections.” “Caught and convicted, she was sentenced to death; her hanging, however, was delayed until after the birth of her baby” (Williams 1986, 5).

Davis’s source is Herbert Aptheker’s milestone study *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943), an influential monograph that helped turn the tide of southern historiography away from the prevailing notion that slavery was a benign, even benevolent, institution that rescued, redeemed, and civilized otherwise hapless, helpless hordes of mindless, child-like savages and Sambos. In *Revolts*, Aptheker actually notes a number of cases in which, when recaptured, pregnant bondwomen who had participated in rebellions and other acts of uncivil disobedience, including the killing of white men, had their death sentences stayed until after they had given birth. The particular instance that Davis references and Williams riffs appears to be Aptheker’s account of an 1829 incident in Kentucky in which “two male slaves in a coffle of ninety men, women, and children” managed to file through their shackles, attacking and killing “Mr. Petit” and “Gabriel T. Allen,” two of their three coffle guards, and freeing other slaves in the resulting melee. The third guard, “a well-known slave trader named Henry Gordon,” aided by a slave women, “managed to mount a horse and, although pursued, made good his getaway and rounded up aid” (287). As Aptheker further details:

The posse thus formed is reported to have succeeded in capturing all the slaves, and six of the rebel leaders, five men and one woman, were sentenced to hang. The woman was found to be pregnant and permitted to remain in jail for several months until after the birth of the child, whereupon, on May 25, 1830, she was publicly hanged. The men were executed November 20, 1829.

(Aptheker 1943, 287)

Note that while this historical account identifies the white slave traders by name—the two who were killed and the one who survived and sounded the alarm that made good the capture of

the insurgents—the enslaved have no names, neither those rebels caught and hanged, including the pregnant woman kept alive long enough to give birth, nor the female slave who reportedly helped Gordon escape the fate of his two dead slave drivers. Aptheker, citing a reporter's account of the incident, does tell us that all of the condemned slaves were resolute in justifying their actions and resigned to accepting their fate, one of them exclaiming just before the noose tightened around his neck, "Death—death at any time in preference to slavery" (288).

No doubt the anonymity of their lives—the unknowns of the unnamed insurrectionists who so stoically died for freedom—is part of what captured Williams's attention after learning of their fate in "Reflections" and tracking Davis to her source in *Slave Revolts*. It was in turning to that source that Williams also happened upon the second of the two incidents that would become the inspiration for "Meditations on History" and *Dessa Rose*: Aptheker's obscure allusion to an 1830 report of a white woman "living in a very retired situation"—a remote farm in North Carolina—who was believed to have given sanctuary to runaway slaves (Aptheker 289). It was out of these veiled references to two heroic, nameless, faceless female figures lost to the dustbin of history that a Black feminist fable was fabricated. "How sad, I thought," Williams writes, "that these two women never met" (Williams 1986, 5).

The pregnant slave girl insurrectionist condemned to death and the refuge-giving white plantation mistress may never have met in "real life"—in the American past as chronicled in the official records that traditionally have served as source material for historians like Herbert Aptheker. But their imagined encounter is vividly and convincingly brought to life in Williams's historical "meditation," where the nameless, faceless slave girl with child and the unknown, no-name white farm wife and new mother, left to fend for herself by a feckless husband, become Dessa Rose and Ruth Elizabeth Sutton, "Miz Rufel," whose chance encounter in the remote reaches of a rundown plantation saves both of their lives and leads each woman to love and respect the other's humanity. The tale of their imaginary meeting in the slave South of the 1830s is what Alice Walker calls "one of the great missing stories"—a "deep, rich, compelling work that begins to reconstruct the past of women's (and women and men's) friendships across racial (and colorist) lines."²

A "Meditation on History," then, in the Sherley Anne Williams sense, is a compensatory codicil to the valorized record. To meditate on history is to fill in some of the empty spaces and unknown names of the archive, repopulating the past with those whom the official story has ignored, forgotten, defamed, and left unnamed, like those insurgent slaves who died for freedom. As Brian Connolly and Marisa Fuentes have written of the historical silences that limit our knowledge and understanding of the slave past:

We have irretrievably lost the thoughts, desires, fears, and perspectives of many whose enslavement shaped every aspect of their lives. We don't have access to their stories or how they were shared intimately—furtive communication among enslaved people, between mother and child, lovers, or siblings. And it is not simply about our losses. The silence is also an action: it is the silencing of enslaved voices and the power that these voices could have had to challenge a slave owner's persistent and violent representations of black and enslaved people.

(Connolly and Fuentes 2016, 105–106)

Connolly and Fuentes go on to suggest that what we do not know about the horrors, the hardships, and the heroics of these past lives lost to us has perhaps dire consequences for our understanding of the present and the future. The meditations on this lost history penned by novelists like Margaret Walker, Sherley Anne Williams, Gayl Jones, Barbara Chase-Riboud, and Toni

Morrison perform an act of retrieval that allows us to imagine what might have been. These and other creative writers deploy the poetic license of fiction to rematerialize buried lives and lost souls, enacting a kind of poetic justice that serves as a counternarrative to the assumptions and presumptions of so-called historical fact.

In her own brilliant outcry against the silences of the archive and the valorized historical record, "Venus in Two Acts," the Black feminist theorist Saidiya Hartman asks,

how does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features?

(Hartman 2008, 3)

Her answer in "Venus" is an inventive methodology she calls "critical fabulation," a provocative play with the past—with the "received or authorized account"—that allows us to reconstruct "what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done," not in an effort "to *give voice* to the slave," she insists, "but rather to imagine what cannot be verified" (11–12). "[S]training against the limits of the archive," critical fabulation allows the scholar to trace the dust tracks of history, to extrapolate from "the received or authorized account" in an effort "to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible" (11).

Respectfully drawing from Hartman's theory, I have elsewhere argued that historical fictions and neo-slave narratives like "Meditations on History" and *Dessa Rose* might well be called "literary fabulations" for the extent to which they, too, stretch the boundaries of the archive. They, too, trace the dust tracks of the many millions gone—an unnamed slave girl, a no-name farm wife, a trio of colored insurrectionists—in a medium that "allows us to envision the interior lineaments, forbidden loves, crossed paths, unspeakable injuries, and impossible choices of characters brought to life on the printed page, out of a past we can only imagine" (duCille 2018, 59).

But what shines through Williams's literary fabulation is not simply the story of a single slave girl or a solitary white woman, whose paths intersect in life-changing, life-saving ways, but, rather, the larger metanarrative of community, of the collective spirit and group action that are, perhaps, the main tools that made it possible for a captive people to survive against the odds of a brutal, totalitarian system. Though she remains behind and enslaved herself, Jemima willingly aids and abets Dessa's escape, saving not only the slave girl's life but also that of the son Dessa will soon deliver.

Later in the novel, the sisterhood of slaves will again save Dessa when she encounters a crazed Nehemiah, who has her jailed as the fugitive he has been searching for. Aunt Chloe, the old colored woman the sheriff calls upon to examine Dessa under her clothes to determine whether she has the scars by which Nemi insists she can be identified, claims not to see or feel the welts the whiplash left. Nathan, Harker, and Cully, the three insurgents who were with Dessa in the coffle, return to the belly of the beast, risking their own hard-won freedom to rescue the condemned slave girl, who would hang without their intervention.

The sanctuary these runaways find on a remote plantation and the bonds they form with the white mistress—who, among other earth-shattering reversals of the world order, wet nurses Dessa's Black newborn son, Mony, when the trauma of captivity and escape leave his young mother short of breast milk—extends the meaning of community across the color line. Not only does Ruth "Ruint" (as Dessa dubs her for her choice of a Black bedfellow), commit the unpardonable sin of sleeping with a slave, she also conspires with a gang of them in

a clever, if dangerous, phony slave-selling scheme that separates unsuspecting planters from their capital and the chattel they purchased from Miz Lady, in a private sale, for “their own family use” (203).

Additionally, the secret of female vulnerability the two women come to share while playing lady’s maid and mistress the night Ruth is nearly raped by a drunken planter carries community far along the way to friendship. “The white woman was subject to the same ravishment as me,” Dessa thinks of the incident. “I hadn’t knowed white mens could use a white woman like that, just take her by force same as they could with us.” Being called on to assist Miz Lady in evading the white man bent on raping her opens Dessa’s closed mind (and hardened heart) to the knowledge that, despite her white skin and lady status, Ruth Elizabeth Sutton “was as helpless in this as I was, that our only protection was ourselves and each other” (201–202). Slave and mistress, darky and white woman, ultimately become to each other simply Dessa and Ruth.

If the sense of a subversive community of slaves at work behind the scenes of what the master sees is part of what leaves me jubilant at the conclusion of “Meditations on History,” it is also the thing that pierces my sentimental heart anew every time I read the words Williams puts in Dessa’s own diary in the novel’s epilogue: “We come West and Ruth went East, not back to Charleston; she went on to ... Philly-me-York—some city didn’t allow no slaves.” Reflecting on their time together, Dessa admits to missing the white woman she finds it hard to live without. She has known some good white people, she says. “But none the equal of Ruth.” And even in supposedly free territory, the former slaves often needed some white person “to stand protection” for them. “And who can you friend with, love with like that?” And then the tear-jerking denouement: “Oh, Ruth would’ve tried it; no question in my mind about that. Maybe married Nathan—if he’d asked her ... but Ruth went East and we all come West ...” (236).

Williams creates such a deep sense of interiority in *Dessa Rose* and such a unique but utterly believable bond between her characters that it is hard, even painful, to close the book and let them go their separate ways at the novel’s end. When our lives intersected and we became colleagues and friends at UCSD in the mid-1990s, I shared with Sherley Anne my almost overwhelming nostalgia for what these people went through together, what they were to each other, and my perhaps immature, anti-intellectual desire for another chapter, which Williams seems almost to signal with her use of ellipses as end punctuation. Not that I mean to claim credit for it (she said immodestly), but shortly thereafter, Sherley began work on a sequel. Sadly, she died before she could finish that next chapter, so we will never know where her ellipses might have taken us, whether East and West would ever meet again. But I like to think that somewhere out there in the virtual world of words where all good stories go, the descendants of Dessa Rose and the descendants of Ruth Elizabeth Sutton have found each other and are working together to build a better world than the one their ancestors knew. And out of Sherley Anne’s fabulation, I am able to love history once more.

Notes

- 1 The phrasing is Angela Davis’s, from “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” *The Black Scholar* 3:4 (December 1971), 11, the essay that in part inspired Williams to write “Meditations on History” and *Dessa Rose*.
- 2 From the back cover dust jacket of the first edition of *Dessa Rose*.

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WHITE FEMINISM AND OTHER GHOST STORIES

Suzanna Danuta Walters

The more enlightened our houses are, the more their walls ooze ghosts.

—*Italo Calvino*, *The Literature Machine*

What woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman's face? What woman's terms of oppression have become precious and necessary to her as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny?

—*Audre Lorde*, *The Use of Anger: Women Responding to Racism*

Apparently, white feminism is responsible for Donald Trump's election, ongoing white supremacy, the failures of the reproductive rights movement, bad television shows and worse films, Amy Schumer and Lena Dunham, why no one wants to be a feminist, and just about everything else. Or so one would think if you did a deep (or even shallow) dive into "white feminism" on Google: the hits for white feminism are more than those for "toxic masculinity," "patriarchy," and "misogyny" *combined*.

What is this thing called "white feminism?" For surely it is "haunting feminism." Discussions of this topic populate our blogs, our books, our magazines, our political debates. Not restricted to arcane academic musings, this phrase circulates widely and promiscuously. And—like a ghost—it is fervently reckoned as real by some, as laughingly ephemeral by others, and as evanescent but eerily tangible by still others. Perhaps this is an odd metaphor here, for it would be easy to dismiss ghost stories as simply fake or false, designed merely to scare or chill. But ghost stories can also be stand-ins for a deep unease that can be hard to name directly. They can serve as displacements, coyly hinting at longstanding social and intimate troubles that seem dangerous to address explicitly. Ghosts are not simply the dead come back to signal to us of their presence, but can serve as reminder that what's past often is (sadly) prologue, that hauntings cannot be willed away or even transcended but are often present as felt memory, the bracing refusal to forget. Ghost stories are, in other words, dense with meaning: deeply embedded in both narrative and oral traditions, culturally and historically shifting, literal and also signifying so much more. *Racism* within the women's movement is most assuredly *not* a ghost story. Rather, it is the grounding tale of most social movements emerging from an American history in which slavery and white supremacy were the founding tenets. But "white feminism" is more complicated, more wraith-

like in its shape and form. It tells some genuine unghostly truths about racism but serves more to haunt and discomfit than to substantively challenge and revise. White feminism is intersectionality's reviled ghost; it is its foil, its antithesis, that which must be named and vanquished in order to enter the garden of intersectional delights.

The accusation of "white feminism" can serve as a kind of ghosting too, in the social media sense. The act of "ghosting" someone—cutting off all contact and almost *deleting* them—stops the potential for accord and conversation. When you ghost a former lover, you are essentially saying they don't matter enough to even communicate your displeasure to them directly. More to the point, ghosting aims to hurt not heal. There is a kind of violence in the act, a display of anger by abrupt and often unexplained withdrawal. A harmful weapon, ghosting leaves little room for the possibility of reconciliation or even a more banal "agree to disagree" stand-off. Ghosting eradicates the desire for meaningful—even painful—discussion and critical debate.¹

Let me be absolutely clear: the ongoing struggle to account for the history of racism within feminism and current work decentering white women's experience (or at least naming it as such and not universalizing it) is crucial to the future of both feminist theory and politics. One can think of the groundbreaking work of scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, or bell hooks, or Hazel Carby, or Paula Giddens—or any number of theorists who moved us all to reconsider how the world looks when the margin becomes the center of our thinking. The insistence from Black women that white women do less talking and more listening could not be more apt. Hazel Carby laid this down powerfully back in 1982 in "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," a critical essay that names the phenomenon of multiple and simultaneous oppression (what we might now call intersectionality) and correctly analyzes the many ways in which feminist theory works within a presumption of white women as "women," and therefore makes Black women's herstory, as she calls it, both invisible and tangential to the feminist project. Indeed, she—and many scholars before and since—point out that the very concepts central to feminist analysis (about the oppressive nature of the family, or the bind of maternity, or the public/private divide) are much more complex when the lives of women of color come into view. A treasure trove of feminist scholarship has developed that asks of white women, as Carby did, "what exactly do you mean when you say 'we'?"² and that argues for, as bell hooks puts it, moving the margin to the center in feminist scholarship and activism.

When a feminism (an action, a theory, a movement organization) evinces racism (or homophobia or ... any form of discrimination?) it must be named and challenged. Of this most would agree. But it is not at all obvious to me that the ways in which "white feminism" circulates in blogs, tweets, posts, and even more scholarly and journalistic writing helps in that endeavor. It closes ears *not* because it is harsh on white women but because it doesn't actually go substantively enough into the deep structures and everyday practices of racism. In short, it is time for talk of white feminism to disappear so we can really talk about racism, both within and outside the feminist movement.

There seem to me three real problems with the "white feminism" trope. First, it is used as a handy stand in for simple disagreement—a way to dismiss arguments or positions without really engaging with them substantively. So instead of diving deep into an argument, you dismiss it with a phrase that seems to say everything but really just says "I don't like what you are saying and want to dismiss you out of hand." There is a long history of this on the left generally and of course feminism more specifically, where derisive phrases or terms (bourgeois, imperialist, etc.) get thrown out and thrown down as a substitute for engagement or as way to push aside positions or people with which you disagree. Second, it is often used to talk about white women more generically—as in the post-election discussions around the white women's vote for Trump—not making any distinction between a *feminist* who is white and a *non-feminist* who

is white. Third, it is used as a synonym really for “racist” or even merely nonintersectional feminism. For some writers, such as Cate Young, it is “any expression of feminist thought or action that is anti-intersectional.”³ So if you are a feminist scholar who has been critical of intersectionality as a methodological and theoretical framework for feminist theory, you are guilty of “white feminism?” Or here, (white) feminist Emma Coleman writing in *New America* claims that “everyone who isn’t actively an intersectional feminist is tacitly supporting the oppression of women of color.”⁴ Intersectionality, here, does the work of offering itself as the beautiful, good, twin to white feminisms’ evil ugly sister. The term “intersectional feminist” is often bandied about with the same lack of rigor as “white feminist” and often as its “good” counterpart. But it is just as often used to signal feminists of color rather than an intellectual and political engagement with the theories of intersectionality.

The discourse of “white feminism” (and it is a *discourse*, a weighted framework evident in varied venues) often *disenables* more substantive and substantiated analysis of racism. Indeed, the problem of racism—both generally and within feminism specifically—is too important to be reduced to a titular bad object, a ghostly apparition that can be swatted away with denunciations and denials. As Jennifer Nash and Samantha Pinto argue, “white feminism is cast ... as precisely what must be disavowed, cast off from the corpus of feminist theory and politics, in order to save feminism itself.”⁵ After years of watching this play out in political life, in the academy, and on social media—and seeing the use and misuse of this phrase—I am convinced that the very real problems of racism both within the feminist movement (now and in the past) and racism outside of the feminist movement (now and in the past) are not well served by the endless invocations of “white feminism.” This poorly defined and too-broad designation often serves as a glib shorthand for a feminism that is stupid, old school, and not with the woke intersectional feminist program. To be clear: white feminism is a term of denigration. No one identifies themselves that way, unlike, say, socialist feminism or radical feminism.

Many critics, such as Reni Eddo-Lodge, are at pains to make clear that this is “(n)ot about women, who are feminists, who are white. It’s about women espousing feminist politics as they buy into the politics of whiteness.”⁶ Similarly, Rafia Zakaria argues that the designation “white feminist” concerns those who “refuse to consider the role that whiteness and the racial privilege attached to it have played and continue to play in universalizing white feminist concerns, agendas, and beliefs as being those of all feminism and all of feminists.”⁷ But too often, as I hope to delineate here, these provisos are really just performative and run counter to the generalizations offered up by those for whom “white feminism” is a monolithic and hegemonic force.

The examples of this mis- and overuse are endless. Article after article and social media post after post trot out the phrase as drop the mic throwdown, obviating the need for substantiation and explication. Often written by white women eager to prove their wokeness, they most enjoy taking down other (white) feminists, especially activists. One that struck me recently was an attack on the recent reproductive rights actions that featured women donning *Handmaid’s Tale* robes to vividly protest the retro reproductive policies of the present. Gemma Hartley, writing in *The Week* with the headline “What white women are getting wrong about the abortion debate” insists that these “cis white women” activists wearing the Handmaid’s robes are way off base because the Handmaid’s robes are “melodramatic and ineffective ... and dismissive of the real harm that is happening here and now.”⁸ How, precisely, are these symbols—used here in the service of protest and activism—dismissive of the effect of anti-abortion laws on all women and most especially poor women of color? That poor women and women of color are disproportionately affected by draconian anti-choice laws is true and, frankly, regular talking points of most mainstream feminist organizations. But how to move from that reality (which, by the way, is explicitly acknowledged by virtually all of the pro-choice organizations) to trashing the

symbolic activism of feminists as emblematic of some imagined failure of *white feminism* ... is an analytic leap without meaningful substantiation.

My beef with the phrase is serious and assuredly *not* motivated out of some banal call to “unity” or out of some desire to assuage white women’s hurt feelings. Cry me a river. Black feminists have written extensively on the “weaponizing of white women’s tears” as deflection from criticism and reassertion of white women’s centrality. True enough, although the tears of white men such as Kavanaugh and Rittenhouse when called to account for their violence seems worth noting a bit more. White women’s responses to critical conversations about race can too often take the form of either guilty chest-beating or self-righteous and angry assertions that the bonds of sisterhood are being needlessly broken. White feminist defensiveness and resentment when challenged is a real problem that not only impedes feminist organizing but effectively re-centers white women when their hurt feelings become the very topic of conversation. White women’s fears and tears can and have caused real damage (from instigating violence toward people of color to promoting a vision of white womanhood that needs protecting) and defensive whining about “mean” Black women is both wrong on the face of it and frustrates alliances across race.

I think that white feminist presumptions of their own good intent (e.g., how can we be racist? We’re feminists!) make the experience of being challenged ever more painful. As feminist scholar Sarita Srivastava points out, “in the face of antiracist challenges many white feminists may feel that it is their self-image—as good, implicitly nonracist people—and particularly their shared moral identity as feminists that is under siege. In other words, we can see that the typical pattern of emotional responses to antiracist challenges—anger, fear, and tears—is in part produced by implied challenges to what counts as a good feminist, a good person, a good woman, and a good national citizen.”⁹ Or, as Robin DiAngelo notes in her book on white fragility, “white progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because, to the degree that we think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived.”¹⁰ To imagine ourselves *not* part of the problem is ... part of the problem of course. Wrestling with our own (call it what you will) racism, white privilege, blindness to difference, must be the ongoing work of all feminists whose desire for a better world is inclusive and antiracist. I have little white lady nostalgia for a (fictive) sisterhood that existed in some imagined idyllic feminist past. No doubt the use of the term *sisterhood* in much of second-wave feminist writing and politics was presumptively white (and, by the by, heterosexual as well), even though it was a key term of solidarity coming out of and connecting with Black communities and Black politics.

However, a lot has happened in feminism in the years since these deep discussions about racism challenged that presumptively white sisterhood. It is a grave error to not recognize that the feminism of *now* really is different, shaped by this troubled past but not necessarily stuck in it. As Kate Harding cogently points out, “one can acknowledge an unbroken line of white supremacy through the feminist movement, as through all of American history, without pretending that white feminist concerns have remained static.”¹¹ Surprise, surprise: feminists, even white ones, are capable of learning. One of the things I love so deeply about feminism, in fact, is its willingness to rethink and re-invent itself, and one of its most profound re-imaginings has been about race.

But if you were a newbie to feminism, you wouldn’t know that, because the phrase “white feminism” has achieved almost totemic status. For many young people—and older ones new to feminist politics—this phrase seems self-evident, unassailable, and timeless. In the feminist classroom, the use of the phrase “white feminism” can be particularly unhelpful, given that so many young people entering these classrooms know little of feminist history but are increasingly (thankfully) eager to pull apart the suffocating shroud of racial denial. They are very quick to deem *anything* they don’t like or disagree with or that is a point of debate as an example of

“white feminism,” rendering the discourse a too-easy substitute for the hard work of unpacking competing arguments and analyses. The insistence that one is *not* a white feminist (and its corollary, one *is* intersectional) performs a (glib) form of alliance, a designation as a “good” feminist. In my experience and in conversations with colleagues around the country, there’s not a semester that passes without students invoking this phrase to basically stand in for any version of feminism they deem unworthy.

I think a lot of white women invoke the phrase “white feminism” to strategically (if unconsciously) inoculate themselves against charges of racism, to signal how “woke” they are and ally themselves with feminists of color, rendering the discourse more about these white gestures at atonement and inoculation than a substantive reckoning with institutional and ongoing racism. “White feminism” plays a role for white feminists quite like “coming out” stories have for straight allies. While these are important narratives about coming to terms with one’s sexuality, I’ve always been struck by how much these films and TV shows and novels focus on straight (often parental) reaction to the coming out. The queer storyline (and suffering) often gets lost or sidelined as we home in on how the straight person reckons with this information. So just as the coming out story really says more about straight fragility and fear than anything about actual queer life, the white feminism story says little about feminism of any kind and more about assuaging white fragility. Or, as historian Laura Briggs says, “It’s a kind of piety, not politics, full of the thrill of a deeply personalized anti-racism, the pretense of having said something difficult and powerful.”¹² To be a white feminist is to be derelict in one’s feminist duty, to be remiss, to be standing in the way of feminist truth and justice. And to be critical of this discourse is a lose/lose situation, for to challenge this story is always to be accused of embodying it.

But where does this phrase come from and when did it start entering our cultural lexicon? Feminists have been talking about race and racism (within the women’s movement and outside of it) since there was feminism. One of the most iconic moments in this long history is abolitionist Sojourner Truth’s explosive speech to the Ohio women’s rights convention in 1851 to the roomful of white women (and male allies) who blithely ignored the specific realities of Black women’s existence.¹³ Of course, the fact that this speech was recorded—years later—by a white suffrage leader and put into an unlikely Southern dialect for the Dutch-speaking Truth is ironic evidence of the racist parameters of much of the suffrage movement.

Perhaps the earliest iteration of the phrase may be in 1979, when the late feminist poet/scholar/luminary Audre Lorde opened an essay with the line “Black feminism is not white feminism in blackface.”¹⁴ Interestingly, this piece was not really addressed to white women (Lorde wrote eloquently elsewhere of racism within the women’s movement) but was rather a pointed critique of Black male sociologist Robert Staples who had penned a particularly nasty article (“The Myth of the Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists”) in the journal *The Black Scholar*. So, the original context of these lines is not directed against or in opposition to *white feminists*, but in fact against Staples’ attacks on *Black feminists*. Lorde’s essay challenged the idea—put forth by Staples and others—that feminism was only a *white* women’s project and, in addition, she explicitly rejected forms of anti-feminism within Black (male) academic culture.

Clearly, then, this early usage deviated significantly from its current articulation. But by the early 1980s, the phrase becomes more closely tied to the burgeoning Black feminist critique of racism and white privilege within the women’s movement. Writers as diverse as bell hooks and Adrienne Rich challenged what Rich—a white feminist who wrestled quite epically with issues of race in her work—called “white solipsism,”¹⁵ or the ways in which whiteness itself was so rarely examined. In particular, the use of the unspecified or undifferentiated term “woman” came under fire because so often the presumption of whiteness was never articulated much less acknowledged as a real problem of analysis. This erasure of racial difference served many func-

tions, but one of course was to essentially “hide” the attachments of white women to white power and white men and, simultaneously, to presuppose an automatic alliance or sisterhood between white women and women of color. These very legitimate criticisms about “white feminism” expose invisible assumptions that (deliberately or inadvertently) universalize white women’s experiences as if they somehow spoke to *all* women’s experiences. The poster child for this racial obfuscation might be second-wave icon Betty Friedan whose diagnosis of a “feminine mystique” for women locked out of the labor force and sequestered in suburban homes seemed based on the lives of a very small swatch of upper- and middle-class heterosexual white women. Because, of course, women of color and working-class white women have always had to work.

Taking this type of white privilege-infused work to task has and continues to be enormously productive, in part because white feminism is not put forth as a monolithic and ahistorical “thing” attached automatically to white bodies or to some phantasm called “mainstream feminism,” but rather understood as the specific ways in which white privilege and presumption get mapped onto a narrow version of feminism. To be sure, the discourse of white feminism can (still) serve as a rubric to challenge white privilege, call out racism, and foreground women of color in feminist politics and theory. Indeed, Rafia Zakaria and others have documented instances (such as behaviors by the leadership of NOW) in which an institutionalized “white feminism” really does seem to accurately define a particular organization or movement orientation. But such cogent and level-headed characterizations have largely gone by the wayside in the internet-fueled rush to apply the phrase.

The current usage is even more alarming precisely because the phrase has been activated in the recent past in smart and thoughtful ways. In fact, we really have to jump to the internet age to begin to see the phrase circulating in any large-scale way. By about 2010 or so, it can be seen constantly in feminist social media circles and has increased to the point where its usage is difficult to quantify. Google “white feminism” and you’ll turn up around *78 million hits* of dubious provenance. The complex history of Black/white gender politics has largely disappeared from public purview (although not from scholarly analysis), replaced by a simple invocation of “white feminism” as somehow both the ineluctable ghost of the past and the universal reality of the present.

Here’s an example of the confused thinking that often sustains the white feminism discourse. As most of us now know, the majority of white women voted for Trump in 2016. Horrible, but true. Undoubtedly a sign of the deep racism that undergirds US culture and that motivated both white men and white women to vote for Trump against all basic decency and even self-interest. But to make claims (as many, many writers did) about white *feminists* or *feminism* at all out of this statistic is unreasonable: does anyone really think those white women who voted for Trump are *feminists*, white or otherwise? Why would we designate white female Trump voters “as somehow ‘feminist’ and as trafficking in the most dangerous and violent form of feminist politics: white feminism?”¹⁶ Do those white female Trump voters support the majority of feminist issues? Did they, on the contrary, join in the *antifeminist* loathing and demonization of Hillary Clinton? Indeed, we can read the votes of white women against Clinton as a (sad, infuriating) sign of their active disidentification with feminism of any kind—liberal or otherwise. They are white *women*, to be sure, but hardly feminists! And one would want to break this demographic down a bit too: my guess is the majority of them were heterosexual (can’t imagine loads of white lesbians voting for Trump), and I would also guess Christian, because the statistics on, say, the Jewish vote point to an overwhelmingly and consistently Democratic bloc. In point of fact, this white woman’s vote was assuredly not a white *feminist* vote but rather a vote of largely heterosexual, Christian, married, and generally not well-educated white women, a group that consistently votes Republican (in fact, a higher percentage of those same white women voted

for Romney than Trump). Yet a flurry (or more accurately an onslaught) of indictments against “white feminism” emerged from this voting statistic about white women. For example, Tamar Winfrey Harris, writing in *Bitch* magazine, claims that “The triumph of President-elect Donald Trump represents the failure of many things. One of them is white feminism.”¹⁷ Erstwhile Hillary-hater Liza Featherstone bleats the truly odious and misleading headline “Elite, White feminism gave us Trump: it needs to die.”¹⁸ The examples of this conflation of “white women” and “white feminism” are endless. As in so many of these pieces, Featherstone shifts from noting the percentage of white *women* who voted for Trump to the apparent proximal cause: white *feminism*. Predictably, the author dismisses racism and sexism as contributing factors in Trump’s victory in order to place the blame firmly on evil Hillary’s white feminist shoulders, and the shoulders I suppose of all the women who supported her (interestingly, the huge numbers of Black and Latina women who both voted for her and campaigned for her get ... little mention.). For Melissa Gira Grant,

[t]he eulogies, elegies, and requiems for white feminism have been written, and, this time, they’ve been penned by white women. Time of death would appear to be November 8th, after an election in which 53 percent of white women voters installed a braying patriarch ... at the seat of American power.¹⁹

Another headline calls out the “53 percent issue” as a “problem in American feminism.”

No doubt the statistic is jarring: any woman voting for such an awful misogynist is chilling news. But this is a data point that should logically be understood as emerging from the long history of both American *racism* and American *misogyny*. The problem isn’t white *feminism* here, but the staying power of white racial resentments that have long caused white women to ally with the interests of “their men” and white supremacy, spurning both feminism and racial justice projects. Back in the day, we used to call this phenomenon “male identification” and that retro designation unfortunately still holds true, although of course white women’s support for white supremacy is not only vectored through the (white) men in their lives but through their own subjectivity *as* white women. Women betrayed other women, for sure. They do so, alas, on a regular basis. But *feminism*—white or anything else—organized from the very beginning *against* the election of Trump. The problem is actually that we need more women to be *feminists*—particularly white women.

The women’s march came in for similar attack. Brittney Cooper acknowledged that it was the “biggest feminist action ever recorded,” but then pivots to reduce this historical *feminist* action to “a public profusion of white-lady tears” by white women who had “failed to get their people.”²⁰ A sign at the march that said “Don’t forget: white women voted for Trump” went viral but was then used as a vehicle to indict the Women’s March as politically bankrupt, even though the op-ed by sign-holder Angela Peoples was in fact a cogent and pointed analysis of the stark difference between white and Black women’s voting patterns (and that had nary a word to say about feminism—white or otherwise.²¹ But surely one can presume that the vast majority of those marching that day did not, in fact, vote for Trump! Other writers were not as thoughtful and made curious slippages, reducing this massive *woman-of-color* led march²²—with one of the most intersectional and diverse platforms in recent memory—to a shallow display of white lady bad faith.

These post-election attacks on “white feminism” are some of the most egregious, and continued through the 2018 midterms which brought an unprecedented number of women of color to Congress but still saw white women voting ... problematically to say the least. In fact, the anger at the “53 percent” broadened into a more general call: “white women come

for your people.” It is vitally important for feminist white women to reckon with the ways in which we benefit from white supremacy even as we remain oppressed by male dominance. But, as Emma Gray notes in a piece in *HuffPost*, “broad calls for white women to come for white women can flatten the reality of just how divided white women are from each other. Yes, white women as a whole tend to vote Republican, but dig into the data and deep schisms based on religion, region, marital status, education and age become apparent. For example, white women as an aggregate voted Republican and have for years, but college-educated white women did not.”²³ In other words, as many political scientists have noted, “women” are not really a cohesive political group. But feminists are. And feminists aren’t generally voting for racist misogynists!

As feminist historian Laura Briggs points out, this call for white women to “get our people” is a practical political error *and* a category mistake. First, “it makes right-wing white women out to be more politically naïve than they are, and converting them much easier than it is.”²⁴ Moreover, the call “confused our exhortations to each other *within* feminism that anti-racism is white women’s work with a project beyond the feminist movement.”²⁵ In other words, these right-wing women aren’t *our* women (they aren’t feminists) and they aren’t accidentally voting for Trump ... they are doing so as part of a long effort (think here of Phyllis Schlafly, evangelical women, women leaders of the anti-abortion movement, etc.) that aligns conservative white women’s versions of normative gender roles with both religious ideology and deeply entrenched segregationist and racist values.

The woman/feminist slippage continues unabated. Ruby Hamad begins her book about white feminism by recounting a post-Charlottesville Fox news segment in which a white woman cries and the Black woman cohost remains stoic.²⁶ But this woman who cried is not a feminist: she is a Trump-defending Fox news guest! White fragility and the weaponizing of white women’s tears are real phenomena and must be named, interrogated, and challenged. But it seems vital to make the distinction between a generic “white (female) fragility” and the same actions enacted by avowed and committed *feminists*.

In a much-circulated piece in *Medium*, Kitanya Harrison does make a distinction between white *feminism* and white *women* in referencing the 53 percent of white women who voted for Trump (“I’m not sure how many of these women would identify as feminists”) but then goes on to conflate the two in a later article, dismissing all the “white feminists” who went “on a rampage” after Kavanaugh was confirmed.²⁷ So, was the “rampage” (and this is a bad thing?) all the feminists (white, Black, Latina, Asian) who protested and organized and sat in and got arrested? And she advances no evidence that the Kavanaugh protests were “white feminist” events that somehow elided Black feminist and intersectional needs and demands.

I have seen example after of just this sort of slippage (and not just in social media posts but in serious books and scholarly articles as well) where “white feminism” is used to speak about white women who aren’t in any way feminists as a way to dismiss a broad and varied array of social movements and actions. Sometimes it just seems to stand in for some generic “white woman” (who usually has no allegiance to or identification with feminism) or even some vague and unspecified “mainstream feminism” or “liberal feminism” as if those groupings were themselves self-evident and uncontested.

In that same piece and in others, Bette Midler’s tweet during the Kavanaugh hearings about “white women as the n-word of the world” is marshaled as evidence of said rampage. But, I have to ask: since when is Midler some feminist spokesperson? The author undercuts her own important criticisms even further by invoking Melania Trump’s sartorial style during a trip to Egypt (pith helmet and linen suit: imperialist attire for sure) as being somehow “marshaled in service to White Feminism.”²⁸ Just because some CNN reporter mentions this outfit in the con-

text of women's rights in Egypt doesn't give us leeway to make generalizations about feminism, white or otherwise.

Harrison and many others who write these popular pieces about "white feminism," make some critically important points about cultural appropriation and historical amnesia. For example, in a post on *Medium*, Tamela Gordon offers a sharp critique of white feminism that relies on both personal experience and broader historical knowledge. She acknowledges the fear that speaking some of this will cause white "allies" to turn away and label her divisive and then names that move as part of the problem. Indeed, she points out, "98% of the white women I know—whether from my workplace, my childhood, or my gym, haven't the slightest clue as to what goes on in a Black woman's neck of the woods."²⁹ In recounting a political meeting in which her white friends only asked her questions related to "Black" issues, she is met with defensiveness and tears when she raises this. These reactions, of course, "play a major role in separating white and Black women."³⁰

Here, Ezinne Ukoha—writing in *Medium*—declares that "the audacity of white feminism is the core of white supremacy."³¹ Does anyone really think feminism—of any kind—is the core of white supremacy? Maybe white supremacists instead? And her evidence? This post makes extremely valid points about the lack of (white) feminist outrage on social media when Black women are victims, but then veers into an unrelated take on Samantha Bee's "feckless cunt" comment about Ivanka Trump. Bee was attacked for this—and Ivanka defended—and somehow this is evidence that "white feminism is at the core of white supremacy." But Ivanka's defenders were hardly a cadre of white feminists. Indeed, most public feminist figures took decidedly different opinions on this than the (non) feminists that the author quotes. One thing that often gets lost in the loose overuse of this phrase is not only nuance but accuracy. So here, in this same piece, the author inaccurately asserts that no feminists spoke up when Roseanne Barr made her vile comments about former White House advisor Valerie Jarrett.³²

In social media and mainstream reporting, the #MeToo movement has been attacked as a white feminist takeover of the original work of organizer Tarana Burke, who began using the phrase as early as 2006 in her work with survivors of sexual assault. For example, numerous articles dismiss "the whitewashing of #MeToo" or wonder if "#MeToo can go beyond white neoliberal feminism?" But the truth is a bit more complicated: when Alyssa Milano (the actor who started the new iteration of #MeToo on the internet) found out about Burke and her years of work on sexual violence, she immediately corrected herself (publicly), cited Burke, and then began speaking and working with her. Almost every piece about #MeToo indeed notes Burke's work and she has become a superstar speaker and advocate. In other words, invoking some wholesale white feminist erasure of Burke is just factually incorrect, as Burke herself has noted in many venues, including an interview for BBC News where Burke

says she didn't feel like her work was ever "hijacked" by people who were more powerful, but does believe that's something the media may have done ... Tarana and Alyssa have met and *discussed the Me Too movement in public* since the actress first tweeted about it. If Alyssa Milano didn't say: "Wait a minute, I didn't start this. This black woman named Tarana Burke started this", people would not know my name.³³

Similarly, racist acts by white people—which should rightly be denounced—are somehow condemned as representative acts of not just white *people*, or even white *women*, but white *feminists* and white *feminism* writ large. For example, a white woman calls the cops on an eight-year-old Black girl selling bottled water in a repeat of many such racist acts that seemed to populate the summer of 2018. Curiously, #permitpatty (as she came to be called on the internet) gets "read"

as a tale about white feminism. One such tweet—from a well-known feminist public figure—demands that “White feminists, when we say come get your people, we mean come get your girl, #PermitPatty, out here harassing little Black girls.” But #permitpatty is no more “my girl” than is Ivanka (or Melania) Trump. To call out white women’s complicity in racism must be done and done hard. But why presume that “white *feminists*” have any attachment to the rancid racist politics of a #permitpatty? In another piece in the *Boston Globe*, reporter Jenee Osterheldt makes the same error—referencing “white feminism”—when discussing the odious and stupidly racist comments of Mary Bono (who, as CEO of USA Gymnastics, took a swipe at Nike for supporting Colin Kaepernick) and Bette Midler.³⁴ And over at *Babe*, Diyora Shadijanova writes about the Kendall Jenner Pepsi ad (that trivialized racism and the work of antiracism) as “the epitome of performative white feminism.”³⁵ But she insists that Jenner represents “everything that’s wrong with white feminism.”³⁶

So, when we see calls for white women to come for other white women who voted for Republicans or support Trump more generally, I don’t disagree exactly. But let’s be more precise: white feminists need to do some hard work with these *nonfeminist* white women to pull them toward the light, without indulging in a slippage between white women and white feminists. There are good examples of just this sort of nuanced analysis, such as Treva Lindsey’s smart post-midterm piece in *Vox* where she simply lays out the facts about white women’s voting and allegiance to white supremacy without somehow making some broad statements about white *feminism*, and Laura Briggs’s comments on this have been helpful as well.

But we might also wonder why it is that we aren’t asking (nonfeminist) white women to disavow their white supremacist men? Or to push all men—including those supposedly on the left—more toward feminism? In other words, most feminist white women on the left don’t have loads of social ties with white Trump supporters—how can we “come for them” when they are not us? White women and feminists who are white are not the same thing. This seems obvious, yet the discourse of “white feminism” conflates and confuses these two with shocking regularity.

Examples of this conflation between white women and white feminists are just far too easy to come by, even in the supposedly more deliberative world of academic scholarship. In a long piece purportedly on white feminism in *Racism Review*, (white) sociologist Jessie Daniels leads with an analysis of the tweetstorm that erupted in December of 2013 when PR executive Justine Sacco tweeted from an airplane, “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just kidding. I’m white!”³⁷ A heinous tweet for sure (although perhaps she meant to point out the racial dimensions of our public perceptions of AIDS?), but how is this an example of “white feminism?” Since when is this unknown PR person a feminist spokesperson or figure of any kind? That these tweets are racist or appear to be so: true enough. And she is a woman, also true. But as “evidence” in an article explicitly about white *feminism*? Here we see in stark display—once more—the distracting conflation between racist acts by white *women* and white *feminism*. Throughout the long series of posts that comprise the Daniels piece, white women and white feminism are used as one singular “thing.” And when she does talk about actual white women who are actual feminists, she goes over-the-top in deeming them enemies of all that is woke and decent. Eve Ensler comes in for particular attack when Daniels refers to the “Ensler-industrial-complex” in her indictment of Ensler’s apparent “white feminism!”³⁸ Daniels deems her part of “carceral feminism” which is particularly (and awfully) ironic given that Ensler has spent years of her life working with women in prison (and, by the way, with an international coalition of women of color as part of the leadership team of VDay and One Billion Rising).

Hashtags and Twitter campaigns—or campaigns responding to a tweet as above—account for the lion’s share of “white feminism” circulations. The enormously influential hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen, however, began in a strange and incongruous way, as a response by

blogger Mikki Kendall to white *male* blogger Hugo Schwyer who apparently proclaimed himself a feminist (and was published on feminist sites) while at the same time making a career out of attacking women of color on Twitter.³⁹ He proceeded to have a bit of a Twitter breakdown in 2013 where, among other things, he admitted to trashing women of color to somehow benefit his career. Clearly, this guy is a nutcase and a predator—it turns out he earlier attempted to murder his girlfriend and admitted to numerous “relationships” with young female college students while on faculty at a California university! Fake white male feminism, maybe. And yet this case too became a nodal point for reckonings about what evil “white feminism” hath wrought.

It is worrying that the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen was triggered by a social media breakdown by a controversial and clearly awful white MALE “feminist” and yet the more apropos hashtag #solidarityisforwhitemaleallies never emerged. It’s interesting to note that in Robin D’Angelo’s bestselling book on white fragility, the only chapter on anything about gender is entitled “white women’s tears” and while she is not wrong on this there is no concomitant chapter on white men’s violence which seems to me to be much more the problem ...when does anyone ever talk about white men’s tears?⁴⁰

While it is certainly true that behind the hashtag lurked resentment at white feminists who had employed Schwyer and anger at the outsized visibility of white feminist voices in the mainstream press, I do wonder how much of the anger at that inequity should be laid at the feet of those white feminists? The largely male and white leadership of major media institutions should indeed be taken to task for ignoring women of color as spokespeople and pundits. And white feminists who are in leadership positions and participate in the marginalization of feminists of color should be held accountable and challenged, just as I hope I would be if—as chair of a department—I only hired white women.

That there is some big historical back story to the “white feminism” storyline is undoubtedly the case. The history of the suffrage movement is a case study in not simply white women’s racism, but the conflicting positions and debates around suffrage. In the battle for suffrage—particularly in the US—the question of who would get the franchise first (e.g., Black men or white women, Black women being almost wholly out of the equation) tore the movement apart and, according to some historians, paved the way for a post-reconstruction formation of women’s rights as above and against civil rights. Even celebrated leaders such as Susan B Anthony had a complicated and contradictory history, starting out as committed abolitionists and then opposing the enfranchisement of Black men as they felt it was “their turn” first. Whether through the ideology of true womanhood embodied in white domestic femininity or adherence to eugenicist theories or belief in any of the pervasive and popular and everyday forms of racist ideology extant at the time, white women suffrage activists were no less complicit than white men in promoting a variety of ideas of Black racial inferiority and white female “civilizing” virtues. In other words, white suffrage activists were (no surprise) not immune from the racist ideologies that circulated amongst the general public as well as social activists and intellectuals, and were often authors themselves of those same ideologies. Moreover, in efforts to rally sympathy to the suffrage cause, they often trafficked in analogies that proposed white women as victims of patriarchy just like Black men were victims of slavery. These dramatic comparisons had the effect, of course, of making invisible the identification white women had with their white male “enslavers” and the very real power and privilege gained through racial divisions. It is also effectively erased white women’s own slave owning history! Sadly, most of feminism’s iconic figures—from Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Charlotte Perkins Gilman—traded on and in both racist ideology and white supremacist practices and, as historian Louise Michele Newman writes, “white women’s expressions of resentment over the enfranchisement of Black men and

these women's subsequent decision to keep the movement clear of 'race' questions were part of a larger post Reconstruction retreat from support of racial justice."⁴¹

When talking about the suffragists—and citing Francis Ellen Watkins Harper's important critique of the movement—scholars such as Ruby Hamad are on solid ground: these were women who were feminists (of some sort), many of whom were clearly allied with the nativist and racist and eugenicist ideologies of the time. As Hamad notes, "the suffragists, even as they were agitating for their own rights, were still complicit in the oppression of those with less power and status than them, including black women."⁴² Feminist historians and popular writers alike have—for years now—thoroughly unpacked the dominant narratives of the suffrage movement to reveal the racism hiding in plain sight. But Hamad then shifts to what she sees as the ultimate example of white feminism in the case of Emmett Till—again, a white woman behaved horrifically for sure but there is no reason to believe she identified as a feminist. And then Hamad segues into #permitpatty and BBQ Becky as more examples of terrible white feminism (instead of examples of terrible racism by white women).

Post-slavery, Reconstruction history has also been riddled with white female complicity in maintaining and reproducing white supremacy—from women's participation in the Klan and other supremacist groups to the ideology of white feminine purity and innocence that was the bedrock ideology underlying the demonization of Black women as not truly "women" and therefore not "eligible" for protection. There is no doubt that white women's adherence to and promotion of white supremacy is as much a part of the history of American racism as Jim Crow and lynching (both of which had women participants of course).

The more recent history of feminism (what is often referred to as the second-wave), while clearly more aware of racial injustice, was riddled with blind spots, exclusions, presumptions, and outright racism. Emerging from both the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement, many feminists of the 1960s and 1970s had goals that, as historian Wini Brienes notes, "included a color-blind democracy and, for white women who became feminists, a universal sisterhood. But it didn't happen that way between white and Black women. White feminists discovered that their idealism was flawed, that there was trouble between us."⁴³ But as Brienes and other historians of the women's movement have argued, the simplistic narrative of a wholly white feminist activism that was deeply resistant to the inclusion of women of color is simply false or at the very least too simplistic. Like most social movements, to reduce the history of second wave feminism to a singular story line is misleading at best. There were (and continue to be) feminists of many stripes and representing different intellectual and political positions: radical feminists, socialist feminists, and liberal feminists were just a few of those groupings and their contestations and debates included numerous discussions and debates about the relationship of gender equality to the movements for racial equality.

For example, the Boston based socialist feminist group Bread and Roses was explicitly intersectional and inclusive in its formal position papers and much of its activist work, yet the actual membership was largely white. Even more surprising—given the prevalent belief that so-called mainstream feminism was solely a white women's project—was the fact that the 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston (a watershed event in second-wave feminism with over 20,000 participants) had a surprisingly diverse audience where 35 percent of the delegates were nonwhite and one in five were low income. One of the two co-founders of *Ms. Magazine* in 1972 was Dorothy Pittman Hughes, an African-American feminist activist, and pioneering civil rights lawyer Pauli Murray was one of the cofounders of the National Organization for Women. This is all to say that the story of contemporary "white feminism" too often depends upon seeing the entire history of second-wave feminism as irredeemably racist and uninterested in reckoning with its blind spots and presumptions.

And this story of a mainstream, coherent, white feminist movement impervious to questions of racial justice is increasingly inaccurate. What much of the discourse of white feminism misses is a real reckoning with historical shifts: anti-racist, explicitly intersectional feminism (whether globally or locally, in formal institutions such as NOW or in more informal community-based groups) has grown exponentially. This is particularly true in the past 30 or so years, where the deep and profound challenges to “white solipsism” proved paradigm shifting for both feminist theory and practice. It is worth noting that by now all the major feminist organizations (from NOW to NARAL to Planned Parenthood to Feminist Majority)—entities often deemed prime examples of this thing called “white feminism”—evinced a more or less intersectional and anti-racist outlook. This does not, of course, mean that the workaday practices of those groups are not still troubling in terms of race (and sexuality I would add) but that some moves at reckoning and reconstitution have and are taking place, even in supposedly mainstream feminist venues. *Ms. Magazine* is headed by a Black woman and the Ms. Foundation is investing heavily in programs and organizations that serve women of color. The National Women’s Studies Association—the professional organization for the field of women’s and gender studies—has been led by women of color for years and the vast majority of invited and featured speakers at the annual conference are women of color. Not perfect by any stretch, but it would be inaccurate to make a sweeping claim that designates these mainstream feminist organizations as models of an exclusionary and narrow “white feminism.” Surely, in the academy and in popular discourse too, intersectionality has won the day: everyone wants to be an intersectional feminist, although as Eddo-Lodge rightly notes, that victory was hard fought indeed. And no one wants to be deemed a white feminist.

There has not only been a long and robust history of feminist critique of feminism’s own racism coming from women of color feminists, but (some, not enough) white women have made anti-racist feminism both a social and personal mission and reckoning. Writers as various as Minnie Bruce Pratt, Adrienne Rich, Marilyn Frye, Sandra Harding, and many others looked both inward and outward to interrogate and trouble their own presumptions and privilege and to construct “traitorous” identities (Sandra Harding) and think through, as Rich put it, “a politics of location”⁴⁴ that move past guilt into a deeper social critique of the politics of white privilege. In the academy, contemporary women’s studies curricula have been transformed by this critique and not only altered existing courses but created new subfields around the analysis of whiteness itself.

The huge body of feminist scholarship on Black feminist theory, intersectionality, the invisibility of whiteness and the hypervisibility of “color,” the presumption of whiteness in the invocation of “woman,” and the marking of race only when speaking of women of color, on all of this and more, has been the defining feature of feminist scholarship of the past 35 years or so. Within feminist scholarship, it has long been the case that, as Beverly Guy-Sheftall wrote, “the history of American feminism has been primarily a narrative about the heroic deeds of white women.”⁴⁵ But this is no longer the case and has not been for many years. For example, the correction of the record of both early feminist suffrage movement, abortion rights movement, etc. is the subject of countless books, articles, op-eds, etc.

This work in Black and Latina feminist theory has been voluminous and world altering and I cannot begin to do it justice here. But it has had I think dual or parallel projects. On the one hand, Black, Latina, and third-world feminist scholarship and historiography corrected the record and decentered white women as the (sole, unmarked) authors of feminist theory and politics. On the other hand, this work offered up new intellectual paradigms and frameworks that were not just restorative and additive but initiated substantive rethinking of the very ground of feminist theorizing. These thinkers challenged key texts by white feminists as uncritically

based on white, heterosexual women's lives, yet writing as if they resonated for all women. From Betty Friedan's 1960s lament for women trapped in the home to Sheryl Sandberg's invocation to "lean in," many white feminist writers have persistently and consistently written as if their lives accurately reflected the lives of women of color, and they did this both through omission and commission—leaving their own racial status unmarked and invoking "women" as if we were all the same.

Sandberg's "lean in" feminism is willfully oblivious to race, class, and sexuality differences and disparities. But what is crucial to recognize is that as much as she was lionized in the popular press, feminists of all stripes took issue with the book on many levels—and the criticisms came fast and furious. To mark Sandberg and her ilk as unchallenged exemplars of myopic white feminism is to occlude both the realities of contemporary intersectional feminist organizing and the robust and immediate criticism of the book from many quarters, including so called mainstream and white feminisms. This is all to say that, while I am convinced that the contemporary usage of "white feminism" is often helpful but more often than not unproductive, the deep backstory of feminism's troubles with race provides some context for the "why" of this current discourse.

But this long and complicated history is not done justice through a twitter-ready meme machine that eschews evidence and analysis in favor of insinuation and insult. For, in truth, if "white feminism" is a feminism that, as Julie Zeilinger argues "prioritize(es) the experiences and voices of cisgender, straight, white women over women of color, queer women and those who fall outside this narrow identity,"⁴⁶ this is what *most* feminists would call "bad feminism." Or as Gloria Steinem says, "There is no such thing as white feminism. Because if it's white, it's not feminism. It's either talking about all women, or it's not."⁴⁷ And, as Steinem also points out, "if you call it a white movement, you've eradicated ... hundreds and hundreds of people"⁴⁸ who disproportionately were involved in the very creation of modern feminism. Most feminists of every hue and designation would concur: a feminism that is blindly universalist in its presumption of whiteness is a feminism that is surely on the receiving end of serious criticism both within and outside the academy.

In a piece from *Bitch* criticizing the response to the Aziz Ansari scandal (where comedian Aziz was accused of sexual misconduct) writer Rae Gray deems everything that doesn't accord with her idea of the "correct" feminist response ... white feminism.⁴⁹ Aziz Ansari's feminism is somehow itself "white," no matter that he is an Asian-American man of color and his head writer for *Master of None* a Black lesbian! This sweeping generalization does feminism no favors, and actively prevents deeper engagement with the very real problems of racism both within and outside of the feminist movement.

Which brings me back to what we really should be talking about: challenging racism and white privilege and continuing to build a multicultural and inclusive feminist movement. So why not just say "racist" if there is a feminism that actually needs to be challenged in this way? This is precisely the sort of "tough love"—a love substantiated with analysis and evidence and with the presumption of feminist good intent—that we need. And why not get rid of a phrase that surely may have made sense at one point and that may still resonate in some instances, but that is generally used too loosely? Indeed, one of the biggest problems with the discourse of white feminism is the conceit that feminism is both monolithic and historically unchanging. Because here's the truth: rigorous and systematic internal self-examination has characterized the feminist project from the beginning. Contrary to popular belief—and a skewed intellectual history of feminism that is often trotted out—feminism as both theory and practice has been markedly supple and responsive to challenge and modification. From the early criticisms of class and race biases and blind spots to more recent challenges to Western-centric frames and

heteronormative assumptions, feminism's calling card is its unique capacity to rethink and even reinvent itself in profound and pervasive ways. Feminist theory and feminist politics have both, therefore, undergone significant change over the decades in response to internal reckonings as well as to changing social realities. Feminism's flexibility, its simultaneously global and local concerns, its incessantly self-reflexive and curious stance, render it uniquely available to recalibration. Our suppleness is our superpower. We are hindered—not helped—by a shallow set of pseudo-arguments that shine little light but throw lots of shade.

Notes

- 1 For a rich discussion of haunting, ghosts, and history see Avery Gordon's celebrated 2008 book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (published by University of Minnesota Press).
- 2 Hazel V. Carby, "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," in *Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70's Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 234.
- 3 Cate Young, "This Is What I Mean When I Say 'White Feminism,'" *CateCo Media*, January 10, 2014, www.cate-young.com/battymamzelle/2014/01/This-Is-What-I-Mean-When-I-Say-White-Feminism.html.
- 4 Emma Coleman, "So You Think You're Not a White Feminist?," *New America*, November 30, 2017, <http://newamerica.org/weekly/so-you-think-youre-not-white-feminist/>.
- 5 Jennifer C. Nash and Samantha Pinto, "A New Genealogy of 'Intelligent Rage,' or Other Ways to Think About White Women in Feminism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 46, no. 4 (Summer 2021): 887, <https://doi.org/10.1086/713298>.
- 6 Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 170.
- 7 Rafia Zakaria, *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), 8.
- 8 Gemma Hartley, "What White Women Are Getting Wrong about the Abortion Debate," *The Week*, May 23, 2019, <https://theweek.com/articles/841811/what-white-women-are-getting-wrong-about-abortion-debate>.
- 9 Sarita Srivastava, "'You're Calling Me a Racist?' The Moral and Emotional Regulation of Antiracism and Feminism," *Signs* 31, no. 1 (Autumn 2005): 30. <https://doi.org/10.1086/432738>.
- 10 Robin J. DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018), 51–2.
- 11 Kate Harding, "'Are Women Nasty?' & Other Questions from a History of Injuries," *The Journal of Wild Culture*, November 25, 2017, www.wildculture.com/article/are-women-nasty-other-questions-history-injuries/1694.
- 12 Laura Briggs, "These Are Not My People," *Ms. Magazine*, January 7, 2019, <https://msmagazine.com/2019/01/07/these-are-not-my-people/>.
- 13 This is known as Truth's "Ain't I Woman" speech, though she allegedly never said those words at this convention. Frances Gage included the phrase "Ar'n't I a woman?" (along with other uses of Black dialectic absent from the original speech) in her version of the speech published in 1863 in the *New York Independent*.
- 14 Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider* (California: The Crossing Press, 1984), 60.
- 15 Adrienne Rich, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia" in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1979), 299.
- 16 Nash and Pinto, "A New Genealogy of 'Intelligent Rage,' or Other Ways to Think About White Women in Feminism," 887.
- 17 Tamara Winfrey-Harris, "White Feminists Helped Elect Donald Trump," *Bitch Media*, November 16, 2016, www.bitchmedia.org/article/some-us-are-brave-0.
- 18 Liza Featherstone, "Elite, White Feminism Gave Us Trump: It Needs to Die," *Verso*, November 12, 2016, www.versobooks.com/blogs/2936-elite-white-feminism-gave-us-trump-it-needs-to-die.
- 19 Melissa Gira Grant, "White Feminism Is Over If You Want It to Be," *Pacific Standard*, August 9, 2017, <https://psmag.com/news/white-feminism-is-over-if-you-want-it-to-be>.
- 20 Brittney C. Cooper, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), 267.

- 21 Angela Peoples, "Don't Just Thank Black Women. Follow Us," *The New York Times*, December 16, 2017.
- 22 While the original instigator of the women's march was a white woman, the organizing team quickly became more diverse—even in that first year—and more so as criticism of the leadership continued over the years. Indeed, the rapidity in which the Women's March heard complaints and made changes in leadership and structure speaks to exactly the point I am trying to make here about feminism's capacity to remake itself and course correct on a regular basis and with more seriousness than any social movement in historical memory.
- 23 Emma Gray, "White Women, Come Get Your People. (But Who Are Your People?)," *Huffington Post*, November 10, 2018, www.huffpost.com/entry/white-women-voters_n_5be5ceebe4b0dbe871aa9f4f.
- 24 Briggs, "These Are Not My People."
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ruby Hamad, *White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color*, (New York: Catapult Books, 2020), 3.
- 27 Kitanya Harrison, "When Feminism Dovetails with White Supremacy: Are We Truly Equal If There Is a Pecking Order of Privilege?" *Zora*, October 9, 2018.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Tamela J. Gordon, "(White) Girl Power aka the List," *Medium*, April 27, 2021, <https://medium.com/pantsuitnation/disclaimer-should-you-be-a-white-woman-who-reads-this-and-does-not-identify-with-any-of-the-987fccafe126>.
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- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Mikki Kendall, "#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen: Women of Color's Issue with Digital Feminism," *The Guardian*, August 14, 2013, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/14/solidarityisforwhitewomen-hashtag-feminism.
- 40 DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, 344.
- 41 Louise Michele Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 12.
- 42 Hamad, *White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color*, 93.
- 43 Wini Breines, *The Trouble between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.
- 44 Rich, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia," 299.
- 45 Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of fire: an anthology of African-American feminist thought*, (New York: New Press, 1995), xiii.
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“STOP TREATING BLM LIKE COACHELLA”

The branding of intersectionality

Sarah Banet-Weiser and Zoe Glatt

In September 2020, the American academic, Jessica Krug, a white woman, wrote in a “confessional” *Medium* article that she had been passing as Black for her entire career (Krug 2020). Krug’s story was one in a series of public outings of white people passing as Black, including Racheal Dolezal, who was briefly the president of the NAACP chapter in Spokane, Washington (Aikenhead 2017). Writing about the Krug case, Toure Reed powerfully states (and is worth quoting at length):

The Black identity has become standardized: commodified, reproducible on an industrial scale, tailored and marketed to flatter the projection and needs of its white audience. Much as hip-hop has remained subversive in posture while its political core has shriveled, like rotting fruit, into a soundtrack for the crudest mainstream capitalist values, the mainstream iteration of Black identity has, likewise, become something to fill display windows—the artificially ripped and acid-washed trappings thrown on a faceless mannequin. The superficial markers of Black culture have been so successfully co-opted by mainstream culture that our very notion of Black identity has become flattened where it was once double-edged. There’s a sterility where once there was subversiveness; a goal to flatter the white audience where once there was the aim to provoke it.

(Reed 2020)

The idea that the “mainstream iteration of Black identity ... becomes something to fill display windows” particularly resonates in a context when stores and companies literally filled their display windows with statements in support of Black Lives Matter (BLM) after George Floyd’s murder in May 2020. The move to *brand* intersectionality, we argue, is a move that does not examine nor challenge structural relations of power when it comes to race and gender, but rather is a strategy that narrowly focuses on a commodified and commodifiable identity as a way to build a brand and to accumulate both economic and cultural capital. The branding of intersectionality can in no way be reconciled with legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw’s definition of the concept, which is about taking into account “multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.” Instead, the branding of intersectionality is precisely

not how Crenshaw understands the term; it attempts to address the problem of exclusion “simply by including Black women in an already established analytical structure.” (Coaston 2019). The “already established analytical structure” in this context is that of neoliberal corporate capitalism; as such, the branding of intersectionality is one form of commodifying Black identity. Moreover, as Reed argues, branded intersectionality is “tailored and marketed to flatter the projection and needs of its white audience.”

In the following chapter, we analyze the historical context that undergirds the contemporary branding of intersectionality, namely, the neoliberal brand culture that authorizes a commodification and marketing of “diversity,” often manifest in corporate diversity training programs, advertising and marketing campaigns, which are typically introduced when racism achieves a heightened popular visibility. Then, drawing on examples relating to the heightened visibility of Black Lives Matter in the summer of 2020, we examine the *individual* branding of intersectionality on social media, especially by white female influencers, before then turning to analyze the *corporate* branding of intersectionality, where corporations brand themselves as intersectional through “performative anti-racism” (Hoskin 2020).

We begin, however, by examining some of the ways in which the rich and theoretically complex concept of intersectionality must be distilled and contained in order for it to gain consumerist efficacy. Branding necessarily targets individual consumers, so we trace a number of the ways that intersectionality is distorted and transformed into something that depends on individual and corporate visibility rather than on collective politics. The cultural and media strategies that are involved when branding political concepts like intersectionality share a history with other political movements that have also been coopted, branded, and marketed. We thus position the branding of intersectionality within a continuum, including the branding of feminism, and think through how these kinds of brand strategies deflect attention away from the collective politics of intersectional feminism and anti-racism, while re-routing attention to individual identity and neoliberal logics of “inclusion.” The branding of intersectionality often depends on precisely these neoliberal logics of inclusion, where a complex understanding of intersectionality as relating to structural relations of power is obfuscated in favor of a diluted focus on “diversity.” Indeed, in a corporate capitalist context, intersectionality is often collapsed with this form of cursory diversity.

43.1 Context: the neoliberal business of diversity

In March 2005, in the first season of the US version of the television series *The Office*, an episode titled “Diversity Day” aired in which the politically insensitive boss, Steve Carell’s Michael Scott, required employees to undergo diversity training. Each person was required to tape a card to their foreheads that was labeled with an identity, ethnicity or race, ranging from the vague: “Jewish,” “Asian,” and “Black”; to the narrowly specific: “Martin Luther King Jr.” The episode is uncomfortably humorous, with the show’s characters awkwardly using racial stereotypes to try to guess their colleagues’ “race.” Actor Larry Wilmore, who plays the corporate diversity officer hired to conduct the training, was interviewed in August 2020, and “when asked if he thought the content of that episode could be made in today’s current political landscape, Wilmore responded with a hard no. “Absolutely not,” he told reporters. “There is no way ... ‘Diversity Day’ could be produced today, and probably rightly so” (Schremph 2020).

Perhaps it is true that such a highly offensive kind of “diversity training” would not be possible today. After all, the current cultural and national context has seen the Black Lives Matter movement gaining increased traction over the past few years after multiple Black people were brutalized and murdered by the police. This is also a moment in which white nationalism has

gained a massive and visible following. Indeed, the presence (often mandated) of institutional and corporate “diversity training” has increased exponentially since 2005. In part, this shift in awareness has to do with the hard work that many communities of color have carried out in order to call attention to institutionalized racism, the widening income gaps between white employees and employees of color, and the casually racist environments of most workplaces. But this shift is also, we argue, part of the logic of neoliberalism, a logic that privileges capitalist marketing—including the marketing of diversity—over social justice movements and practice. This capitalist logic is adept at transforming other forms of progressive politics into a marketable commodity as well—and does this by erasing structure and selling self-empowerment.

Indeed, the branding and commodifying of a political concept such as intersectionality requires an analysis of the corporate structure that undergirds such branding, namely, the business of “diversity.” There are differences between branding diversity and branding intersectionality; primarily, the discourse of a particular commodified version of diversity forms the condition of possibility for the emergence of performative and branded intersectionality. Thus, our claim is that in order for corporations to be able to use and capitalize on the language of intersectionality, a structure that strategically valued and commodified a particular kind of racial and ethnic diversity had to be already in place. These “symbolic structures of diversity” are precisely part of the structural racism that feminists of color such as Crenshaw, Patricia Hill-Collins and others have actively *resisted* through cultivating a robust theory of intersectionality and interlocking systems of oppression (Crenshaw 1991; Hill-Collins 2019; Newkirk 2019). As is well-documented by Black feminists, Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality involves three entwined levels: political intersectionality, structural intersectionality, and representational intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991). It is the last, however, that has been capitalized on by neoliberal corporate culture, where intersectionality is firmly tied to the realm of representation; as such, this version of intersectionality is part of an economy of visibility, where the representation of intersectionality becomes an end in itself, severing ties with both politics and structures (Banet-Weiser 2018).

Neoliberal brand culture has authorized and encouraged corporations to embrace a particular version of diversity, one that is emptied of political and cultural significance and made palatable for a consumer marketplace. That is, the branding of “diversity” needed to be in place before corporations could begin commodifying the more specific political concept of intersectionality. The cultural conjunctures of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, a heightened visibility of DEI (Diversity Equality Inclusion) programs in corporations, and the increasing use of social media platforms to appropriate, commodify (and “meme-ify”) complex political concepts and practices, have provided the context for a mainstreaming and diluting of intersectional politics. This has also resulted in widespread appropriation of concepts without attribution or compensation for the Black feminists who initially theorize these concepts. For example, Black feminist Flavia Dzodan wrote a blog in 2011 titled “My Feminism will be Intersectional or it will be Bullshit.” Since that time, the phrase has been intensely commodified and marketed—without attribution or compensation to Dzodan: “thanks to the rise of one of her quotes as a catchall mantra for feminism, she’s seen her own words turned into a cash machine, one that she is powerless to stop” (Romano 2016). The use of intersectionality as a uplifting, catchall feminist slogan, easily and widely applied to t-shirts, tote bags, pins (Etsy, for example, has hundreds of products listed under the category intersectionality), detaches not only the concept from racial and gender justice politics but also severs the connection of intersectionality from Black feminists themselves, tailoring it for white audiences as a kind of performative allyship.

Of course, corporate appropriation and capitalization on “diversity” has been a hallmark of neoliberal capitalism for decades, from using images of people of color in corporate and university brochures as “evidence” of diversity to marketing campaigns to media productions. The

(literal) capitalizing on diversity obfuscates structural inequities and disparities, instead offering a visually affective but politically inefficient picture of diversity. The meritocratic rhetoric that fits so well within neoliberal logics is one that does not challenge structural inequalities due to racism or patriarchy, but instead embraces a palatable form of individualist anti-racism and feminism. As Lisa Duggan, Wendy Brown, and others have argued, neoliberalism in the US in the late 1990s saw a “multicultural” diversity embraced, a narrow, nonredistributive form of “equality” politics, where a particular version of “difference” was repurposed for a new era. The political-economic discourse of neoliberalism has appropriated the rhetoric of the Civil Rights, liberal feminism, and other social movements to usher in a shifted definition of “freedom,” one that is decidedly against the downward redistribution justice of anti-capitalist movements, while fomenting, instead, a form of distributive justice “where capitalism reigns supreme and the market identifies who should get what.” (Duggan 2012, 107; Rottenberg 2018; Hosang and Lowndes 2019).

This neoliberal exhortation for “multiculturalism” and “diversity” manifests, not surprisingly, in the capitalization and monetizing of “diversity” in the form of corporate initiatives, workshops, and other bureaucratic mechanisms that function to provide “evidence” of meritocratic and just hiring practices and resources. This has resulted in another form of papering faceless mannequins and window displays with empty slogans professing racial justice, where the politics of inclusion and marginalization are defanged and exist primarily as a *vener* of change rather than actual structural change. In other words, neoliberal corporations feel obligated to show their commitment to diversity—but not at the cost of profit. Based on racial capitalism, neoliberalism depends on structural inequality in terms of both race and gender (Ferguson 2019; HoSang and Lowndes 2019). Structural change, however, requires more than superficial tinkering; it means radically shifting and changing hiring practices, value of work, pay gaps, methods of promotion and more. As journalism scholar Pamela Newkirk argues, diversity is big business, one that works more as reputational management for corporations and companies than as a commitment to racial justice. As she points out, diversity programs and initiatives are often surface level mechanisms and cover-ups for exposed racism: “Dozens of companies and institutions have sought to deflect controversy over embarrassing missteps or revelations of homogeneous boards and workplaces by launching high-profile initiatives or enlisting a person of color for a prominent post” (Newkirk 2019).

The business of diversity became even more imperative within the 2016–2020 conjunctures of increasingly visible white nationalism in the US, the global #MeToo movement, and the heightened presence in mainstream media of the #BlackLivesMatter movement after the murder of George Floyd and others. As Newkirk points out,

A 2019 survey of 234 companies in the S&P 500 found that 63% of the diversity professionals had been appointed or promoted to their roles during the past three years. In March 2018, the job site Indeed reported that postings for diversity and inclusion professionals had risen 35% in the previous two years. The buzzword is emblazoned on blogs and books and boot camps, and Thomson Reuters, a multinational mass-media and information firm, even created a Diversity and Inclusion Index to assess the practices of more than 5,000 publicly traded companies globally.

(Newkirk 2019)

The branding of diversity has also (perhaps not surprisingly) worked to center whiteness within diversity programs in a number of ways: symbolic diversity doesn’t disrupt neoliberal corporate structure, and thus does not challenge the power relations within this structure that priv-

ilege whiteness. Additionally, with heightened attention to racial and gender discrimination within capitalist culture, those who benefited from progressive policies and social welfare were seen as exploiting and capitalizing on their “difference,” and claiming a spurious “victimhood.” Ironically, the more visible diversity programs become, the more privileged white people in power have claimed to be the “real” victims (Duggan 2012; Cole 2007; Chouliaraki 2020). Thus, in the contemporary environment, we witness two things happening simultaneously: one, more money is being spent on diversity programs and administrators in corporate culture; two, more white people are claiming to be discriminated against in part because of the heightened visibility of diversity programs. This is not a contradiction, however, but a logical consequence of neo-liberal diversity programs and initiatives, which favor visibility and signaling more than actually challenging racist structures; after all, to engage in such a challenge could amount to self-annihilation, since most corporate culture is built specifically on racial capitalism. Citing law professor Laurel Edelman, Newkirk argues that diversity programs also exist to fend off potential lawsuits:

courts tend to look for symbolic structures of diversity rather than their efficacy. In other words, the diversity apparatus doesn’t have to work—it just has to exist—and it can help shield a company against successful bias lawsuits, which are already difficult to win.

(Newkirk 2019)

43.2 “Woke-vertising” and “fem-vertising”

Advertising and marketing campaigns that capitalize on these “symbolic structures of diversity” have increasing visibility in the 21st century. Francesca Sobande has coined the term “woke-washing” to describe the various marketing campaigns that draw on feminism, anti-racism, and social justice to market and sell products and brands as “woke.” As Sobande argues,

brands make use of [Black social justice activism and intersectional feminism] in the content of marketing that predominantly upholds the neoliberal idea that achievement, social change and overcoming inequality requires individual ambition and consumption, rather than structural shifts and resistance.

(2019, 2724)

Woke-vertising and fem-vertising yoke rhetorics of Black social activism and popular feminism to brands and products, capitalizing on the relative visibility of anti-racist and feminist activism in the 21st century. This kind of branding marks the move from politics of visibility, where visibility is a qualifier to politics, to one that Banet-Weiser calls “economies of visibility,” where visibility is the end in itself (Banet-Weiser 2018).

We see this very clearly with the commodifying and marketing of a particular version of feminism (Banet-Weiser 2018; Beck 2021; Zeisler 2017; Rottenberg 2019, Goldman, Heath and Smith 1991, and others). Indeed, Goldman, Heath and Smith coined the term “commodity feminism” in 1991 in an investigation into how feminist politics were re-routed from social and cultural activism to advertisements which used these politics as a way to sell products (Goldman, Heath and Smith 1991). The relationship between consumerism and a particular version of feminist politics has only increased its reach with the advent of social media. In order for feminism to be marketable the radical potential of feminism had to be distilled and contained as a product, which typically meant a safe, palatable, and white mainstream feminism (Beck 2021; Zeisler 2017). As Koa Beck points out,

Sanitizing “empowerment” away from radical, deeply historical activism was potential for fourth wave white feminism because it had to become transactional—something you could buy, obtain and experience as a product rather than an amorphous feeling that rushed in from challenging power.

(Beck 2021, 278)

Popular feminism, as Banet-Weiser has argued, is often more about individual *identity* than it is about a collective politics, resulting in popular feminism remaining at the level of visibility rather than a challenge to structural forms of power. Importantly, this version of popular feminism is deeply entwined with whiteness; the visibility of the #MeToo movement has been critiqued as a movement undergirded by whiteness (Phipps 2020).

And the way in which performative intersectionality is branded, like the neoliberal concept of diversity also centers whiteness. Crenshaw and other Black feminists have conceived intersectionality as a way to think through the ways in which, within the power structures of the US, Black women are left without narratives or resources for their lives as both Black and women. Yet the consumerist branding of intersectionality operates well *within* those power structures, and as such is undergirded, like “diversity,” by a logic of whiteness. For example, the branding of intersectionality in the 21st century is often a reactive move, a strategy to contain public unrest (and public boycotting) after a spectacular expression of blatant racism, whether it is an unarmed Black person killed by police, a tone-deaf ad campaign which diminishes and obfuscates structural racism, or a social media influencer who capitalizes on the heightened visibility of Black Lives Matter to create “edgy” content and gain more followers. The branding of intersectionality is typically a move that is all surface and no substance, where neoliberal logics of capital accumulation work to maintain reputational management in a cultural moment when the everyday, structural racism that all people of color endure is brought into bold relief. Indeed, the idea that “intersectionality has gone viral” (Coaston 2019) needs to be considered seriously: like many “viral” moments, there is heightened attention—and a great deal of money—afforded to specific instances of racism. This functions to not only erase history, but also to shed a light on singular acts of racism—by a cop, a celebrity, a social media influencer—without ever interrogating how these “singular” acts are merely one in centuries of unquestioned acts of racial discrimination that have been sedimented into law, policy, and everyday life. Branding intersectionality is a strategy wherein the “mainstream iteration of Black identity... becomes something to fill display windows;” Reed’s use of “display windows” referenced earlier indicates not only personal displays on social media but also gestures to brick-and-mortar shop displays, and clearly points to the neoliberal corporate logic of this strategy.

As we’ve discussed, imagining and crafting political concepts as commodities is not a new phenomenon, but the specific shape this imagination takes is contingent upon the historical, cultural, and economic conditions from which it emerges. What is, or is not, appropriate to brand in the marketplace shifts depending on these cultural conditions. Indeed, in this conjunctural moment we witness a more complex branding terrain in the West, where intersectionality has become an important element not only in advertising and self-branding, but also in corporate business plans. This multi-layered branding of intersectionality, like so much of brand culture, empties out structural racism and sexism, as well as cultural context. As Brittney Cooper argues, “Intersectionality was a first, formative step that allowed for recognition of the black female subject within juridical structures of power, where she had heretofore remained invisible and illegible, and thus unable to obtain any kind of justice” (Cooper 2016). The *branding* of intersectionality, on the other hand, does more to conform to neoliberal under-

standings of the “post-racial” and hierarchies of whiteness than it truly engages intersectional politics.

There are different ways intersectionality is branded, from actual commodities to individual subject positions to corporate taglines. In the following sections, we explore some of the numerous ways that intersectionality and anti-racist politics were appropriated and branded by *individuals* and *corporations* during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by police officers.

43.3 The appropriative self-branding of Black Lives Matter by influencers

During the heightened global visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, anti-racist and intersectional politics moved from the margins and into mainstream discourse.¹ One particularly visible site for branding intersectionality were social media platforms, from Twitter to Facebook to TikTok. Suddenly, swathes of (mostly white) influencers who had previously had nothing to say about intersectional politics felt entitled to comment on the complex issue of structural racism and mobilize their audiences in support of Black Lives Matter, or else be accused of not caring about social justice, or worse, of being racist themselves. Unsurprisingly, some ill-informed influencers made stupendous errors in their displays of support for the cause, such as staging tone-deaf photo-shoots at protests and other forms of performative activism. The irony of fair-weather white influencers capitalizing on the visibility and popularity of the movement was not lost on BLM activists. Quoted in a *Guardian* article titled “Stop Treating BLM like Coachella,” George Resch commented:

Some people have co-opted the BLM movement in order to get content, and the problem with that and why it enraged people so much is that it is the single most egregious act of cultural appropriation you can imagine ... Repurposing your presence there for content strikes me as one of the most shallow things you can do.

(Paul 2020)

One of the most appalling and misguided examples of appropriative self-branding was the wave of images and videos of white beauty influencers painting themselves in Black Lives Matter makeup looks, including blackface, police brutality-inspired cuts and bruises, and messages such as “#BLM. I Can’t Breathe” (Tenbarge 2020). For example, a white nail artist tweeted images of nails featuring the face of George Floyd and the words I Can’t Breathe, offering the options of “matte” or “shiny.” Even when Black women tweeted “Stop turning black pain into nails, makeup & whatever other aesthetic functions,” the artist did not take down the tweets (Dawson 2020). In another example, the aggregate site Influencers In the Wild, dedicated to outing influencers when they are inauthentic, received submissions from readers during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, reporting

white influencers standing in front of looted stores, posing with protesters and pretending to march. Some even pretended to help rebuild destroyed shops. Others gleefully jumped in front of a camera, trying to capture a photo mid-air with police and military vehicles in the background. Many were wearing heavily styled clothes obviously unsuitable for actual protesting.

(Manavis 2020)

As reporter Chidozie Obasi points out,

A number of influencers have shared Instagram pictures of themselves painted black, in a misguided attempt to show their appreciation of Black culture. The Lebanese singer Tania Saleh shocked fans by posting a picture of herself photoshopped with dark skin and an Afro. She captioned the image: “I wish I was black, today more than ever. Sending my love and full support to the people who demand equality and justice for all races in the world.”

(Obasi 2020)

Again, these kinds of posts were widely condemned by Black feminists, Black Lives Matter activists, and the broader social media influencer community as reinforcing the very racism that they claimed to disavow, and for centering the self-promotion of the influencers who posted them. As photographer and popular beauty influencer Alissa Ashley put it on Twitter,

Raising awareness isn't using fake blood to appear beaten up. It's not using a darker shade of foundation to show your solidarity. It's not writing a dying man's last words on your lips. Black peoples trauma/reality isn't a makeup trend. Like y'all can't possibly be this dumb.

There was intense discussion on social media about how white influencers could play a more meaningful and constructive role in supporting Black Lives Matter, as opposed to these shallow self-branding based approaches. Many Black activists pointed out that white influencers should be decentering their own identities, experiences, and opinions and diverting their (sometimes considerable) audiences toward Black creators and other educational resources.

But even in cases where white creators made all the “right” and politically correct moves, there was performative activism at play here as well. In her video “We Need to Talk: The Race Issue Between Lesbian Creators,” Black lesbian YouTube creator Jade Fox highlights the hypocrisy of her white counterparts who *only* speak about issues of race when expected and called to do so, such as during Black History Month each year and in the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests. As Jade explains, white lesbian influencers were clamoring to speak up about Black Lives Matter and structural racism when it became a mainstream popular issue in 2020, but utterly fail to use their platforms to uplift Black creators the majority of the time, despite the clear inequality that they face in terms of algorithmic visibility and pay:

Just don't sit up on your Instagram all day and talk about how much Black Lives Matter and then when it comes to *your job*, your career on this platform, that you know has a race issue, that you know has an unjust algorithm that you are actually in the favour of, carry that energy right onto YouTube sis, that's all I'm saying!

This point is crucial to the argument that we are making about representational intersectionality. The examples of individuals, businesses and institutions that we highlight in this chapter all have one thing in common: they utilize anti-racism and intersectionality as a branding exercise *only when they have something to gain from it*, and not at any other time. There is something profoundly amiss when it becomes *personally advantageous* for people and organizations to critique their own privilege in a capitalist, racist, and misogynistic system. By self-branding as anti-racist

and participating in representational intersectionality, they accrue social, cultural and economic capital through self-branding.

43.4 Performative anti-racism and corporate culture

As we’ve discussed, in the first decades of the 21st century, we’ve seen the uptake of brands performing intersectionality in the form of wokevertising, as well as white influencers embracing intersectionality as part of their personal brands. Yet it was during the summer of 2020, when the Black Lives Matter movement gained so much mainstream traction, that—similarly to the case with influencers—companies felt both obligated and entitled to publicly support the movement through their products, campaigns and statements, despite their historical lack of support or even awareness of racial justice. As YouTube content creator Nathan Zed put it in a video titled “black lives matter is trendy now:”

We’ve got to the point where companies feel obligated to say it or else they will lose money ... What has Call of Duty ever cared about my black life? Call of Duty and me getting called the n-word while playing Call of Duty go hand in hand. It will say Black Lives Matter in the loading screen and then the whole game is going to a Brown country and shooting people up. We’re in a phase where it’s basically like there’s a monetization on Black Lives Matter, a commodification of Black Lives Matter.

(Zed 2020)

Examples of this commodification of Black Lives Matter in 2020 included Unilever owned Ben & Jerry’s “Justice ReMix’d” flavor, Netflix’s “power of storytelling” campaign, and the complete rebranding by PepsiCo of the Aunt Jemima name and logo. As the PepsiCo subsidiary Quaker Oats put it in a public statement, “As we work to make progress towards racial equality through several initiatives, we must also take a hard look at our portfolio of brands and ensure they reflect our values and meet our consumers’ expectations” (Valinsky 2020). Whilst appearing to be progressive, the statement betrays the real impetus for this rebranding after 131 years with a blatantly racist image and name: *meeting consumers’ expectations*. This move was not about creating meaningful structural change. Rather, it was firmly situated within the realm of representational intersectionality and reputational management.

Indeed, perhaps the most literal example of this kind of representational intersectionality came in the form of the black squares individuals and corporations posted on their Instagram accounts in June 2020. #BlackoutTuesday was ostensibly about *not* posting on social media, using the “time to think about the ways in which many nonblack Americans benefit from structural racism” (Noman 2020), represented visually in the posting an image of a black square on Instagram accounts. Despite the intentions of the campaign to encourage reflection, social media is not a particularly useful platform for thoughtful contemplation. Instead, #BlackoutTuesday became more about performative allyship, with individuals and companies not only using the hashtag #BlackoutTuesday but also utilizing other hashtags, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #BLM. As activist Arielle Pardes pointed out, collapsing multiple hashtags into #BlackoutTuesday also collapsed the activism of those hashtags: “using #BlackLivesMatter when posting black squares and boycotting social media erased the work activists had done on social media to share resources with communities: ‘The posts had completely taken over the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag.’” (Pardes 2020). Rather than encouraging social media users to reflect on intersectionality, #BlackoutTuesday demonstrated one way in which hashtag activism can be malleable, interchangeable, and diluted in the representational landscape.

Another emblematic example of this shift in the political branding landscape following George Floyd's murder was Starbucks' complete U-turn. In early June 2020, Starbucks banned its employees from wearing any apparel that depicted support for the Black Lives Matter movement, for fear that it could be "misunderstood and potentially incite violence," according to a company memo (Allaire 2020). However, just two days after this memo was leaked publicly and outrage started to pour in on social media, Starbucks swiftly changed their position, announcing proudly: "We see you. We hear you. Black Lives Matter. That is a fact and will never change ... Wear your BLM pin or t-shirt. We are so proud of your passionate support of our common humanity." Starbucks did not stop there, however. Shortly thereafter, they also produced their *own* t-shirt in support of BLM for employees to wear, which featured images of placards with political slogans such as "no justice no peace," "time for change," and "Black Lives Matter." Beneath the images sits the tagline "It's not a moment, it's a movement." Considering that they had tried to silence this very movement only a few days prior to this, it is clear that the change of heart was entirely to do with protecting the brand image of Starbucks. After all, they risked losing a lot of money as a result of PR disaster, much like the Aunt Jemima case; much corporate branding of intersectionality is about reputational management rather than challenging racial and gender injustice.

The audacity and cynicism of corporate performative anti-racism did not go unnoticed by those interested in meaningful structural and political change. Feminist-aligning media companies in particular were heavily critiqued for sustaining structural inequalities at an institutional level, whilst enjoying the cultural capital afforded to them by their progressive images. Publications such as *Refinery29* and *Man Repeller* made public statements in support of the BLM movement, which were followed by a wave of exposés from former employees about the lived realities for Black and other people of color working at those companies. Stories abounded of racial microaggressions, the silencing of those who tried to speak out about inequality, unfair pay, and a lack of opportunities for employees of color to rise to senior positions, demonstrating a sharp distinction between the "woke" audience-facing image that these brands portray and the structural inequalities that they sustain in their institutional practices.

Condé Nast owned *Bon Appétit* was one of the magazines that came under fire in a spectacularly visible way for sustaining racist practices, forcing it to respond in an equally public manner. The magazine itself has existed since 1956, but over the four years prior to summer 2020 the brand's YouTube channel became sensationally popular, regularly reaching millions of viewers with its loveable cast of authentic chefs, witty and relatable editing, and regular shows like *Gourmet Makes* with Claire Saffitz and *It's Alive* with Brad Leone. In early June, following a blog post written by Editor-in-Chief Adam Rapoport in support of BLM, an old photo of him dressed in a racist costume for Halloween resurfaced on social media. The fallout of these events was catastrophic for *Bon Appétit*, leading not only to the public condemnation of Rapoport by current and former employees, but also scathing critique of the broader culture in the company. In a damning series of Instagram stories, popular *Bon Appétit* on-screen talent and editor Sohla El-Waylly said that the photo was "just a symptom of the systematic racism that runs rampant within Conde Nast as a whole," adding "I've been pushed in front of video as a display of diversity. In reality, currently only white editors are paid for their video appearances. None of the people of colour have been compensated." Rapoport resigned, and *Bon Appétit* issued a public apology stating that they were committed to making structural anti-racist changes both in front of and behind the camera. But the damage was done; over the following weeks the majority of *Bon Appétit's* most visible on-screen chefs left the company, no longer wishing to work for a racist publication or be associated with its toxic reputation. Despite having "diversified" their food

content, talent and editorial staff in positions of power, they’ve received heavy criticism from audiences for tokenism and performative anti-racism.

What unites all of the examples we have looked at in this section in the *reactive* way in which corporate culture responded to the popular and political energy behind Black Lives Matter in 2020. Within capitalist systems, where businesses are constantly required to *meet consumers’ expectations*, what happens when the majority of consumers lose interest in a particular issue or movement? In 2020 it became a *financial necessity* for companies to speak up about BLM and to brand themselves as intersectional, but as the momentum behind the movement simmered down (at least temporarily), so too did the branding response. Indeed, it is not in the economic interest of private companies to challenge the very power structures upon which they thrive. The fickleness with which companies picked up these issues and dropped them once the public appetite had waned speaks to the way in which the branding of intersectionality operates. As Nathan Zed put it at the end of his video,

Just a reminder for some people who are going to be done after this week and never have to think about Black people again until the next time this blows up, some of you guys can do that and the rest of us are still going to be Black.

43.5 Conclusions

In a 2017 lecture at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Angela Davis reflected on the nature of intersectionality and revolution in the current moment. She highlights the fundamental disconnection between capitalism as a structure and the progressive intersectional politics of anti-racism and feminism:

If we stand up against racism we want much more than inclusion. Inclusion is not enough. Diversity is not enough. And as a matter of fact, we do not wish to be included in a racist society. If we say no to heteropatriarchy then we do not want to be assimilated into a misogynist and heteropatriarchal society. If we say no to poverty, we do not want to be contained by a capitalist structure that values profits more than human beings. (Davis 2017)

In the current moment we are seeing a significant rise in the commodification and branding of intersectionality. It is tempting to believe that this marks progress in society, inasmuch as intersectional politics and intersectionality as a concept have become so mainstream that even corporate culture has jumped on the bandwagon. But in this chapter we have argued that in a capitalist society where companies trade on their images of “wokeness,” anti-racist messages have become yet another commodity to be packaged by marketing and PR executives, incapable of providing any meaningful challenge to existing inequitable relations of power. Branding intersectionality is, as Reed pointed out at the beginning of the chapter, “something to fill display windows—the artificially ripped and acid-washed trappings thrown on a faceless mannequin.” Through this process of filling cultural display windows, from influencers to Instagram to corporations, the structural and political substance of intersectionality have been hollowed out, leaving only an empty signifier behind: a vessel for selling products.

Note

- 1 There is a noteworthy, if marginal, segment of influencer culture which has been and continues to be dedicated to intersectional, feminist, and progressive political content (Glatt and Banet-Weiser 2021).

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MEGAN THEE STALLION SINGS THE BLUES

Black queer theory and intersectionality

Nikki Lane

44.1 Introduction

I want to make a simple, but perhaps slightly ridiculous, statement as a point of departure towards a conversation about Black queer theory's relationship to traditional Black feminist approaches to intersectionality: Megan Thee Stallion sings the blues. The statement is ridiculous because Megan Jovon Ruth Pete, known professionally by her stage name Megan Thee Stallion, or "Hot Girl Meg," is a rapper, not a blues singer. Yet, I believe the statement is only slightly ridiculous because hip-hop is not a complete departure from the blues. Many have remarked upon the "bluesy" nature of hip-hop as well as the similarities in the emergence and development of the blues and hip-hop (Neff 2009; Rabaka 2012; Morgan 2017). Rabaka (2012), for example, has noted that while the blues and hip-hop emerged during different sets of socio-political realities, each was developed by poor, working-class, Black people under harsh economic, racial, and social oppression. Both gave voice to the particularities of the experiences of those Black folk suffering under harsh socio-economic conditions. And like most Black popular music and Black popular cultural forms, each has suffered from the disdain of bourgeoisie Black people. During the emergence of blues and hip-hop as popular music and cultural forms, Black people more concerned with being viewed as respectable than with all Black people being treated with dignity regardless of their class or relationship to normative ideas surrounding gender and sexuality (Rabaka 2012, 53), feared that the blues and hip-hop would "set the race back" because each provided evidence to those holding on to white supremacist ideas that Black people indeed were morally and socially depraved. Indeed, both the blues and hip-hop are cultural phenomenon that aren't just about music. They provide evidence of deep, longstanding ideological struggles within and outside of African American life.

The blues and hip-hop are musical forms that have inspired dispositions, ways of life, and language practices among African Americans throughout the country (DuCille 1993; Baker Jr. 1994). And while musically and aesthetically, blues and hip-hop are noticeably different from one another—blues characterized by the "blues note" which seems to make the songs wail, where hip-hop's bass heavy songs are laced with rhymes over looped beats sampled from a variety of genres—their forms often rely on identical elements including melodic percussion, call and response, and a gifted vocalist with an ability to blend talk and melody. Most importantly,

each deal with prescient socio-political realities, racialized sexuality and gender, and broader sexual and gender politics and offer narratives told through culturally specific stories and melodies of sadness, joy, depression, debauchery, and fantasy. To put it plainly, they are made up of the same stuff.

In 1999, Angela Y. Davis published one of her most important contributions to Black feminist scholarship: *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. In the book, Davis (1999) expounds upon the rich history and texture of the blues, and its importance to the Black feminist intellectual and activist tradition. Throughout Davis’s discussions of Ma Rainey, Bessie, and Lady Day, Davis identifies ways that blues women’s performances often laid bare the realities of Black gender and sexual politics, frequently centered Black women’s sexual desire all while questioning and critiquing male dominance in both public and domestic life. Davis emphasizes the importance of the work blues women did on stage and off to defend the blues from attacks by middle-class, “respectable” Black folks while also holding steadfast to their rights as women to make the blues an important form of social protest. Blues women, we learn, often broke with traditional heteronormative romanticism that was common in American popular music of the time (Davis 1999). They provided evidence that heteropatriarchal ideals of heterosexual love and romanticism were not always possible, desired, or even respectable. These blues women actively challenged, like the Black women novelists of their time, normative sexual scripts (Carby 1986). Ultimately, Davis argues, these blues women’s work foreshadowed Black feminist consciousness. The feminist threads running through their Black, southern, working-class, woman-centered blues in the 1920s and 1930s are vital to understanding the formation of Black Feminist Thought (Carby 1986; Davis 1999; Collins 2000).

Like blues women before them, the singers and the novelists alike, hip-hop and R&B women, rappers like Missy Elliott, Queen Latifah, Lil’ Kim, Monie Love, Behamadia, and Nicki Minaj as well as hip-hop generation singer-song writers like Erykah Badu and Me’shell Ndegeocello foreshadowed a late-20th century Black feminist consciousness. Their work inspired a generation of both hip-hop feminist (Morgan 1999) and queer Black feminist scholars (Harris 1996) to develop and embrace new ways of thinking with feminism and an emerging queer theory. Black women working within the cultural movement that is hip-hop, and adjacent R&B traditions like neo-soul, were prompting new kinds of questions for Black feminisms including questions about sexual desire, pleasure, and queerness itself (Clay 2007). Adrienne Clay argues that “one of the strengths of late-twentieth-century women-of-color feminism is its ability to be re-interpreted and built upon” (Clay 2007, 57). It is the ability to “be re-interpreted” that allows for the emergence of Black queer feminism rooted in hip-hop sensibilities.

Joy James argues that there is no Black feminism in the singular, instead there are only Black *feminisms* (James 2013, 25), a point made evident in the variety of Black feminist thought seen at the turn of the 21st century. If there is no one specific way of doing Black feminism, we should be able to acknowledge that there is no singular way of doing intersectionality. There is no singular way of operationalizing it (McCall 2005), or making sense of the “intersections” of race, gender, sexuality, and class. What happens at each intersection? Is it a traffic circle? While the term “intersectionality” may have been coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the task of teasing out how race, gender, sexuality, and class as structural forms of power elide differences within Black women’s experiences had been taken up by Black feminist scholars for decades prior to 1989 (Crenshaw 1994; Cooper 2016; Nash 2018), but only a few would center on how heteronormativity, as a political, social, and economic structuring force, effected Black women’s experiences of either heterosexuality or same-sex desire (Clay 2007; Miller-Young 2014). Both hip-hop feminism and queer Black feminism ask important questions about pleasure,

gender performance, performativity, sexual practices, and sexuality that remain undertheorized (Hammonds 1994).

Borrowing from the body of literature within hip-hop feminism, queer Black feminisms, and Black queer theory, my essay offers a comparative analysis of the work Megan Thee Stallion, a gifted, Texas-born 25-year-old Black woman who is one of the most dynamic lyricists in contemporary hip-hop and blues legends and American music visionaries Gladys Bentley, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, “The Mother of the Blues,” and Bessie Smith, “The Empress of the Blues.” I ask, how does Megan the Stallion’s work borrow from the blues women who came before her? And alongside this question, I ask how does Black queer theorizing borrow from Black feminist approaches to intersectionality? If, as Ali Colleen Neff says “‘singing the blues’ is the salve (rather than a symptom of) ‘having the blues’” (Neff 2009, 38), then how does Megan’s work sing the blues of contemporary Black women and femmes? From what socio-cultural conditions does her body of work provide salve, or relief? What do Megan’s performances document about the blues of Black women in queer, non-normative bodies, saying non-normative things, and doing non-normative things with their bodies? How might Megan’s performances serve as “salve” for those bodies whose very existence are in opposition to the demands of public discourses of race, gender, class, and sexuality?

In wrestling with these questions, I will apply a Black queer feminist analytic to think through the ways Megan Thee Stallion’s performances of gender and sexuality illuminate the work Black women do work at the shores of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Through my analysis, I will demonstrate the ways Black queer theoretical approaches build upon Black feminist theories of intersectionality—not unlike the way that Megan builds off the work of blues women who came before her—to “sing the blues” of Black queer folk. I will argue that in the same way Megan Thee Stallion “sings the blues” through a different, but intimately related genre, and within a historically and materially mediated set of demands on Black women and femme bodies, so too does Black queer theory do intersectionality through a set of frameworks sensitive to the ongoing debates taking place among Black feminists, but also firmly rooted in the insistence on centering the always already non-normative articulations embedded within racialized gender and sexuality. In the same way that Megan Thee Stallion samples from blues women, so too is Black queer theory sampling approaches to the “intersections” of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Black queer theory emerged from a collection of Black gay, lesbian, and bisexual scholars around the mid-1990s, around the same time Megan was born. Where some Black feminisms were principally concerned with cis-gender, heterosexual Black women’s relationship to sexuality, there were always a set of Black lesbian and bisexual feminist thinkers asking questions about Black female sexuality within what would emerge as Black queer theory, and those Black feminist scholars are the sources from whom Black queer theory often borrows (Allen 2021). This includes literary critic Barbara Smith, poet Cheryl Clarke, novelist Jewelle Gomez, poet Audre Lorde, writer June Jordan, Pat Parker, and the Combahee River Collective. In other words, multiple theories about the *ways* race, gender, sexuality, and class were related to one another were in circulation within Black feminist theorizing only later concretized under Crenshaw’s “intersectionality.”

I follow Roderick Ferguson’s materialist interrogation of racialized gender and sexuality known as the “queer of color critique” which relies on intersectionality while building upon Crenshaw (1989, 1991) as well as other women of color feminists and queer theorists whose work illuminate the ways that the places where race, gender, sexuality, and class meet might actually be on “the shores” (Ferguson 2005; Gumbs 2010). For Ferguson “analyzing the intersectional maneuvers of race and sexuality means attending to the historical specificity and diversity of racialized sexuality’s locations” (Ferguson 2005, 86). It is vital then to understand the *locations*,

or “the where,” in relation to forms of difference and forms of power. In other words, to ask *where* particular differences make a difference (Lane 2015). To be sure, race, gender, sexuality, and class (among other axes of systemic power) are always pressing upon an individual or group’s existence, but those forms of power and difference don’t always take up the same amount of space-time (Lane 2015). If race, gender, sexuality, and class are not geographically fixed social formations, that is, if they have multiple locations, then one might argue that their intersections remain in constant motion. What then are the particular “maneuvers” that they make (Ferguson 2005, 86)? A comparative analysis, therefore, of Black women doing similar work across two historically linked genres of Black popular music, across two different eras in America, reveals some unique insights into the ways that the complexities of race, gender, sexuality, and class ebb and flow right beneath our feet (Gumbs 2010).

44.2 Intersectionality (Jezebel) and Black Queer Theory (Bulldagger)

Most consider the theory of intersectionality to function as a framework for considering the overlapping power dynamics that are at play between race, gender, sexuality, and class. Brittney Cooper says of Crenshaw’s intersectionality that “as an account of power, intersectionality attended to the particular forms of subjugation and subordination that characterized black women’s intersecting and multiplicative (King 1988) experiences of racism and sexism within the law” (Cooper 2015). She then wonderfully summarizes what she calls “proto-intersectional theories,” or those theories that dealt with the simultaneous effects of racism, classism, sexism, and other forms oppression, as those which

advanced the idea that systems of oppression—namely, racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism—worked together to create a set of social conditions under which black women and other women of color lived and labored, always in a kind of invisible but ever-present social jeopardy. (Cooper 2015)

According to Cooper,

Crenshaw’s argument was that failure to begin with an intersectional frame would always result in insufficient attention to black women’s experiences of subordination. She did not argue for the converse, namely, that intersectionality would fully and wholly account for the range or depth of black female experiences. (Cooper 2015)

Here, Cooper (2015) lays the groundwork for what I argue can be considered the way Black queer theorists works with intersectionality. They begin with an intersectional view of the “ever present social jeopardy” for Black people created under white supremacist heteropatriarchy and since intersectionality cannot “fully account for the range or depth of black female experiences,” Black queer theories, particularly those dealing with the Black female subject, seek to parse out the specificity of the relationships between racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism for those grappling even with the complexity of what it means to be a “black female.” If systems of oppression are “multiplicative,” then by which factors are they multiplied? And to what end?

Here I want to consider how race, gender, class, and sexuality as forms of power produce powerful scripts about bodies which are considered non-normative. Siobhan Somerville (1994) argues that the discursive formations of Black and queer bodies happened at the same time. That is, in constructing the racialized body, the fields of comparative anatomy, biology, and sexology, all relied on the same ideals about the primacy and normativity of white heterosexual maleness

such that all other bodies were discursively figured as deviations (Somerville 1994). Thus, racist discourses concerning Black queerness derives from these overlapping systems of oppression within various contexts, and perhaps, even more importantly, those whose bodies are deemed racial, sexual, and gender deviants have learned to make do, survive, and produce counter-hegemonic discourses that exceed normative prescriptions (Johnson 2001; Musser 2018).

The contexts I'm interested in exploring here are two Black pop cultural formations Black women have used to challenge and critique normative formations of racialized gender and sexuality within Black sexual politics—blues and hip-hop. In this section I focus on the blues, but want to emphasize the fact that Black women in both of these cultural spaces have by necessity taken up distinct positions in relation to two caricatures of Black female sexuality: the Jezebel and the bulldagger. Borrowing from Cathy Cohen (2005), I want to consider the two controlling images (Collins 2000) alongside one another: the bulldagger, an epithet in vogue during the early 20th century refers to a masculine, homosexual temptress who is imagined to “turn” straight women into lesbians; and, the Jezebel, a (presumably) feminine heterosexual temptress who lures unsuspecting men into sexual encounters with her. A tertiary glance at the definitions of each reveals that they have much in common. In fact, the Jezebel might actually be the heterosexual counterpart of the bulldagger. Both figures are evidence of the anxiety over Black women's sexualities, an anxiety that persists to this day. And both justify the ongoing mistreatment and abuse of Black women. It was and remains dangerous for Black women to be seen as either “too sexual” or “too masculine,” and yet, as Black women in blues and hip-hop have shown us, there can be a great deal of pleasure (and money) derived from playing with and dancing around such images (Miller-Young 2014).

In his essay “Of Our Normative Strivings,” Roderick Ferguson “troubles” the historical moment where the Black middle-class responded to the narratives of pathology of Black gender and sexuality by assuming a position of gender and sexual morality (Ferguson 2005, 89). He argues that as Black middle-class people sought to enter the realm of American citizenship, they sought to renegotiate their place within the hallowed halls of gender and sexuality. The 20th century “saw both educated Black men and white women increasingly renegotiate their subordinate status within white patriarchy by insisting on the primacy of their self-definition as modern subjects” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2018, 28). As these new definitions of Black masculinity and white femininity began to emerge, neither were interested in the specificity of the ways that modern Black women were negotiating the terms of their femininity (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2018, 28) and arguably, if they even had access to femininity (Green and Bey 2017). However, there were at least two important pop culture movements that were instrumental to the new ways that ideas about Black womanhood by Black women was being reconstructed at the turn of the 20th century: the Club Women's Movement and the blues.

The Club Women's Movement of the early 20th century saw Black middle-class women taking up the cause for advancing a politics of respectability as a means of ensuring their survival under white supremacy (Higginbotham 1993). By the 20th century, the American pop cultural landscape was saturated with controlling images of Black women. As Patricia Hill Collins describes them, controlling images are those stereotypes and caricatures that justify racist, sexist, classist, policies and the ongoing mistreatment of Black people (Collins 2000). The figures of the Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel are the most discussed of these controlling images. Ultimately, performing Black middle-class womanhood required distancing oneself from these controlling images no matter the cost. Ultimately, however, “the performance of middle-class black womanhood is tied to impossible standards of respectability” (Thompson 2009, 3). As Hobson argues:

One way that black middle-class women located themselves within the boundaries of respectability was in the “quieting,” rigid presentation of their “too large behinds,”

which needed to be tucked in and made as invisible as possible. When black women failed to adhere to this behavior, and indeed, even called deliberate attention to this part of their anatomy, they were seen as encouraging dominant culture's labeling of their bodies as deviant and grotesque. (Hobson 2003, 100)

The politics of respectability required a constant management of one's self, behavior, and comportment (Hobson 2003). It required disappearing—making aspects of oneself invisible even while the marks of Black skin, Black hair, Black noses, Black lips, or Black butts in addition to the attendant behaviors associated with Black people including Black anger, Black laziness, or Black boorishness, remained hyper-visible. The politics of respectability was and remains chiefly concerned not only with self-management, but a set of practices that seek to publicly police Black women's self-representation. Black women who called attention to any aspect of themselves that was supposed to be quiet, needed correction. If they were to achieve respectability, any hints of masculinity, "hypersexuality," their body shape, and their voices, needed to be managed. It's important to understand, however, that the early 20th century saw a variety of responses to the proliferation of controlling images of Black women. The emergence of blues women as recognizable, public figures in American popular culture proves that there were Black women working within what I would call a politics of anti-respectability (Lane 2019), using everything white supremacy had deemed non-normative about them to create opportunities for themselves (Stallings 2013).

Gladys Bentley, also known as "La Bentley," was a blues and jazz performer during the New Negro Movement of the 1920s and 1930s. "La Bentley" was best known for performing her sets in elaborate tailored tuxedos and top hats. She publicly and lavishly dated women and even married them. In embracing masculinity and homosexuality in public, her Black female body represented a living embodiment of the overlapping, contradictory white supremacist anxieties about Black womanhood. The 19th century economic demands of chattel slavery and planter capitalism required that Black women toil as labor units able to produce the same amount as men, with the added bonus that they could produce more labor units (Davis 1981). The 20th century's economic demands expected Black men and women replicate white gender and sexual standards. It is also a time where ideas of Black female "masculinity" manifest most clearly. Economic conditions demanded that Black women work outside their homes to provide for themselves and their families which lead to the charge (by both Black and white people) that Black women emasculated Black men; improperly taking a seat at the "head of the household" where *real men* should be. Black families were imagined to be "matriarchal," a perversion of the (white) normative patriarchal structure, and the era of enslavement blamed for such a construction because Black women believed themselves to be "too strong" (Davis 1981). Constructions of Black women as masculine did not only happen within sociological discourses. They also appeared within sexology where Black women's anatomy served as the bodies on which lesbianism was worked out (Somerville 1994).

According to Davis (1981), Black women during the era of enslavement were "effectively sexless" (Davis 1981) and the construction of Black women as both inhuman and as without femaleness was used to heighten the sense of divine femininity placed within the image of white women (Collins 2000, 71). Green and Bey (2017) ask an important set of questions about the category of woman worth considering:

How does the category of woman function here? Who is it able to hold and how is it able to hold difference? [...] The category women (read cisgender), a category that has been critiqued by Black and Women of Color feminists as a category that

continuously fails, fails to articulate clearly what it is that makes some women, who are not white, who are not middle class, illegible as the imagined universalized representative subject of the category. So we are left asking (1) Are Black women, women? (When? How?) (2) If not, why do we hold on to that category “woman” at all? (When? How?) (Green and Bey 2017, 441).

Green and Bey (2017) question the “and” in “cis and trans,” reminding us that in Black feminist theorizing, we are often presented with evidence that Black women were often not even considered women—their genitalia considered abnormal approximations of those which white women had (Somerville 1994)—and unlike the frail white woman, they were considered to be sturdy, hard, impervious to pain, and therefore, more capable of the hard labor they were to endure. Angela Davis argues that during the Era of Enslavement, enslaved Black women’s sex was only considered on two occasions: when considering that they could reproduce their enslavers labor force, and in the form of the assault that they had to endure at the hands of white men (Davis 1981). Otherwise, their racialized gender did not preclude them from the harshest forms of field labor, even while pregnant (Davis 1981). During the Era of Enslavement, Black women had the same labor demands on their bodies as men. As a result, they *were* strong, powerfully built, and effective in a variety of skillsets. Therefore, they could be charged with being “masculine” but only because by the 19th century, the definition of American womanhood was everything that a Black woman was not. Womanhood was impossible, or at least not imagined as part of Black women’s “nature.” A real woman was white, pious, virginal, domestic, and submissive to patriarchal power (Welter 1966). The restrictive nature of race and gender under the dictates of white supremacy ultimately held that only white people could be “real men” or “real women.” Following Green and Bey (2017), if Black men weren’t considered “real men” in the 1920s and Black women were not “real women,” then one might ask if Gladys Bentley was any less a man?

Bentley enjoyed a successful run in Harlem, playing at clubs all around the district, her longest runs at gay speakeasies. Her non-normative gender performance was not simply part of her act, but a part of how she moved around in the world. She had perfected Black female masculinity. A virtuoso able to play the piano and sing well into the early hours of the morning, she had stamina and swag, and it wasn’t just Bentley’s Black female masculinity that solidified her as one of a kind. It’s likely that her act inspired breaks with conformity by other blues women. Around the same time that Bentley rose to prominence, other blues women, Ma Rainey, in particular, began performing an act where she’d dress in tuxedo, tails, and top hat. She’d move around the crowd, buy women drinks, and eventually take the stage, her big, recognizable voice and personality immediately shaking the crowd as she sang, “Prove It On Me Blues.”

It's true I wear a collar and a tie
Makes the wind blow all the while
Don't you say I do it, ain't nobody caught me
You sure got to prove it on me

Say I do it, ain't nobody caught me
Sure got to prove it on me
I went out last night with a crowd of my friends
It must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men

The lyrics are delivered from the subject position of one who dares others to charge her with being a bulldagger, though the word itself never actually appears in the song. Instead, folks “say I do it.” It, here referring to the act of being with other women. They may suspect what she does in private, Rainey says, but they’ve yet to “prove it” on her. Indeed, much of Rainey’s private life remained out of the papers. It is through rumor that we learn that Rainey privately had affairs with women. Of course, Rainey makes this dare while publicly disregarding gender normative ideas about clothing—wearing what is considered menswear while singing the suggestive lyrics about preferring the company of women. Rainey, like Bentley, does gender non-conforming things and publicly challenges conventional, normative ideas about gendered behavior intentionally choosing to look the part of the bulldagger, a mannish-acting woman. And yet, her temporary, public gender performance is not enough evidence to “prove it.” There is, in the cheeky lyrics and performance itself, only one way to “prove it”—that is to actually have sex with her, or at least try to. Ma Rainey’s performance of “Prove It On Me” encapsulates the ultimate truth of gender and sexual norms. Alone, the performance of gender—the drag of it all—does not tell the full story of what kinds of sexual acts people take up in private. Performing forms of femininity deemed normative by Black middle-class notions of propriety, therefore, also does not reveal the truth of who one is. Rainey may be dressed the part of a bulldagger, but the women who she sleeps with may be the bougie, club woman sitting next to you.

44.3 *Thee Stallion*

It is impossible not to reckon with what Megan is telling us about herself by claiming to be “thee stallion.” In this usage, “thee” is a way of marking one who is the quintessential, the original; the one whom all others are modeled after. She refers to herself as *thee* stallion, meaning that all other stallions are but mere copies, or imitation of her who is the ideal stallion. However, in Standard American English, a stallion is a powerfully built horse with a penis. The usage of the word also carries a particular connotation in Standard American English. To refer to a human male as a stallion would mean that he is both virile and difficult to control. The stallion is a symbol of unrestrained sexuality, wildness. And to be able to break, or dominate and force, said stallion into submission, also says something about the rider. The stallion in American popular lore exists in relation to *thee* symbol of rugged individualism, colonialism, and white freedom: the cowboy. Therefore, only cowboys can ride, handle, and force a stallion into submission. In American tropes of racialized gender and sexuality, uncontrollable wild non-human animals have always been used to fictionalize white supremacist anxieties of Black people’s sexuality. Black people were animals that needed to be mastered, broken, and put into their proper places to be used. Armed only with this definition and connotation of stallion, it might seem odd that Megan would refer to herself as “thee stallion” as we witness her perform high-femme realness. However, Megan is neither working with the Standard American English definition or usage of *stallion*, nor is she working with normative logics of racialized gender and sexuality.

In a response on the social media platform Twitter to someone who questioned whether Megan knew what a “stallion” was (“a male horse”), Megan Thee Stallion explains that “a stallion refers to a tall fine girl in the South.”¹ In other words, in African American Southern Vernacular English, *stallion* is not beholden to normative gender constructions. In fact, African American Southern Vernacular English queers the word *stallion*, referring to a tall, powerfully built woman. Arguably, some of the Standard American English connotation remains. The meaning of *stallion* in the Black South is a Black woman who demands a certain kind of sexual partner (or rider, to extend the metaphor), one who is able to handle her; or one who is at least perfectly comfortable with her physical size and strength during sex. Simply put, the use of *stallion* to refer to a

desirable woman not built according to white normative standards of feminine beauty is but one example of the ways that the language and pop cultural practices of Black Southern folk often demand more of (white) normative racialized gender and sexual constructions. In African American Southern popular culture, the stallion is not a symbol for (white or Black) masculine mastery (over others); she is a symbol of strength, beauty, and a warning that “if you can’t handle all that, then move on to the back.”

While Megan is referring to herself as an idealized version of a powerfully built feminine beauty from the South, she also (purposefully) publicly redefines what it means to be a stallion in the first place. Watching Megan go to work—demonstrating complete mastery over her own body, talking often about being in full control of her sexuality, and creating images that question the dominant racial and gender hegemonic order which continually enact new ways to divorce women and gender non-conforming people from having full bodily autonomy (see Megan Thee Stallion’s music video for “T.H.O.T. Shit”) – then it would seem that she also manages to remap the Standard American English meaning of the stallion. This points to the important work that she does at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality disturbing adherences to strict gender conformity based on white normative codes which were designed for the expressed purposes of maintaining a fiction that Black people were subhuman.

In calling herself *thee* stallion, Megan is placing her non-normative body both in height and, arguably, its shape in public conversation. Most Black women are not shaped like Megan Thee Stallion. Not all Black women have large buttocks. And most of us do not enjoy the strength, dexterity, and stamina of Megan Thee Stallion’s knees. Megan Thee Stallion is five foot ten inches tall. By comparison, Serena Williams is one inch shorter. Neither woman is supermodel thin. In fact, both are muscular, and both have dealt with charges of being both “too sexual” and “too masculine.” Megan has been subject to a great deal of public scrutiny by those concerned with her “hypersexuality.” The self-management and public policing tactics of Black middle-class women at the turn of the 20th century remain in place, however, as I’ve argued before, those tactics have never been the same tactics used by all Black women. Megan makes no attempt to either suppress her sexuality, or deny her erotic sensibilities (Lee 2010). In fact, Black women in African American Southern pop culture have consistently, publicly bent and twisted the rules of normative gender and sexual constructions (Stallings 2019). Their rebellion against normative definitions bring attention not only to the fact that Black women have been left out of racialized constructions of “true womanhood” (Davis 1981; Giddings 1984; Higginbotham 1993; Hobson 2003; Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2018), but also to the fact that not all Black women are invested in being included among those who get to count themselves as respectable members in the category of “true woman” in the first place (Green and Bey 2017, 441).

At the end of her essay on theorizing the intricacies of racialized gender and sexuality, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” Hortense Spillers (1987) argues:

We are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject. Actually claiming the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to “name”), which her culture imposes in blindness, “Sapphire” might rewrite after all a radically different text for a female empowerment. (Spillers 1987, 80)

This has never been more relevant than now. Woman is a racialized gendered category of being in the United States and “true womanhood” was crafted by white patriarchy for white women at the expense of women of color. Spillers (1987) suggests that there is “insurgent ground” to be claimed by the “sapphire,” another controlling image meant to produce policies to control and

confine the supposed “angry black woman.” In other words, it will be those who are dangerously and precariously cast in the roles of “controlling images” who are positioned to radically rewrite these normative modes of being. People like Megan Thee Stallion who dispense with the need to enact a politics of respectability that is ultimately rooted in white supremacist grammars of race, gender, and sexuality while she takes up the task of creating new text for us to understand what empowerment might look like in this moment for a Black woman.

Femme and high-femme practices are questions taken up by contemporary Black queer and trans thinkers, as are questions about decoupling femme gender expressions from individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB) (Bailey 2016). Desire, particularly as it shows up through these questions, demonstrates the ongoing need for works such as Mireille Miller-Young (Miller-Young 2014) whose insightful ethnographic exploration of Black women in pornography shows us the limits of a Black feminism unwilling to get down and dirty with Black women who are fucking for money and who profit from being desirable to those who are willing to pay them with the attention and money they desire. Joan Morgan needed such a feminism; one “brave enough to fuck with the grays” (Morgan 2017, 40) and I think that’s what Black queer theory has been doing. It is the play in the grays that have offered compelling examinations of Black gender and sexuality (Davis and Collective 2019). When we examine the ways that Megan Thee Stallion “fucks with grays,” as a rapper, she calls up a set of linguistic practices rooted in Black queer life to do it.

In her song “Body,” Megan raps, “the category is body, look at the way it sit; the ratio so outta control, the waist, that ass, them titties” (Megan Thee Stallion 2020). By sampling the language of the ballroom (“the category is body”), Megan does at least two things simultaneously. First, she shows that ballroom culture and the people therein, belong in hip-hop. Second, she intentionally shows us that femme body parts do not squarely belong to AFAB people. Instead, anyone might have the ratio and conversely anyone, herself included might find them attractive. She continues, “If I wasn't me and I would've seen myself, I would have bought me a drink (Hey)/Took me home, did me long, ate it with the panties on.” The self-love of one’s femmeness does not preclude others from indulging, and it does not mistake the love of self as a lack of, or cessation of, principles of the communal. On the contrary, in this verse, she masterfully makes room for the possibility that she too might engage in non-normative forms of sexuality. Thus, her relationship to racialized gender and sexuality is discursively situated within the realm of the queer. To put it simply, there’s something masculine about Megan (her body), and queer in her lack of discomfort in playing in the gray areas of sexuality. This, alongside Megan Thee Stallion’s high-femme aesthetic and her name serve as examples of taking on “the monstrosity” of Black femaleness (Spillers 1987), and it falls directly in line with a strong current within Black public life and Black women’s popular culture to disregard gendered meanings even as others tell us how we should behave.

44.4 Imploding thee bulldagger and thee Jezebel

In placing the “bulldagger” in relation to Patricia Hill Collins’s controlling image of the “Jezebel,” I am following Cathy Cohen (2005) who suggests that there is potential in building coalition amongst those who share a nonnormative and marginal status in relation to heteronormativity (Cohen 2005). It is our relationships to the power structure of heteronormativity that should serve as the guiding principle for how to relate. Megan Thee Stallion and the blues women before her play at the edges of proper forms of womanhood. The Jezebel, like the Sapphire, is a racialized gender and sexual category which has been used to fix particular kinds of white supremacist ideologies onto Black women’s bodies all while justifying our ongoing mistreatment (Collins 2000).

Here, then, I'm curious about asking about the ways that Megan Thee Stallion and blues women write texts that relish in not being "real women," and in being everything they are assumed to be, including the Jezebel. My intention in this section is not to affix the image of the "Jezebel" to Megan Thee Stallion, but instead to demonstrate how readings of her that try to fix her into such a box ultimately fail as she makes the caricature collapse and implode in on itself. And it is this metaphor of implosion that I hope you'll retain as I continue.

In musing about the "ghetto blues" of hip-hop, Joan Morgan (2017) writes: "When brothers can talk so cavalierly about killing each other and then reveal that they have no expectation to see their twenty-first birthday, that is straight-up depression masquerading as machismo" (Morgan 2017, 73). Following Morgan, I would argue that hip-hop's blues is deeply situated within Black gender and sexual politics: depression masked by the need to perform a "hard," heteronormative, homophobic form of masculinity. Arguably, Megan Thee Stallion's lyrics might too be masking a deep blues about the state of Black gender and sexual politics. Might there be sadness inherent with coming of age during a time in society (and hip-hop) when you're already positioned as a bitch? In her song "B.I.T.C.H." Megan raps, "I'd rather be a B-I-T-C-H (I'd rather keep it real with ya)/'Cause that's what you gon' call me when I'm trippin' anyway," borrowing from the work of Tupac who raps "I'd rather be ya N.I.G.G.A.," laminating twin tropes that apply within and outside of the Black communities of practice, she raps:

Why you wanna play with me? You know I'm undefeated
A real hot girl know how to keep a nigga heated
You say you want respect, well treat me how you wanna be treated
You told me keep it real, but you don't practice what you preachin'
You want me to blow your phone up and come a-lookin' for you 'til I find ya.

If sexism in hip-hop is "the complex mask African Americans often wear both to hide and express the pain" (Morgan 2017, 74) as Morgan argues, then how might we approach the ways Black women who rap may also be utilizing a set of linguistic apparatuses rooted in the affective register of the blues. Megan's desire to be wanted and desired, treated with respect, glorified, are not only playful, full-bodied boasts, but also serve as a very real "blues-laden soul train" (Morgan 2017, 73) into the broken promises of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and white supremacist capitalism. It's not "all good" for Black women, even those who are heterosexual, beautiful, and express their femininity in ways that align with racialized heteronormative logics. Neither capital nor patriarchy really make you feel good—wanted, perhaps, but primarily based on what it is you're willing to do for them. The pop feminist anthems like "Who run the world? Girls!" are similarly rooted in a fantasy that has not yet arrived within the context of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, because Black women know who really runs the world, and we all know damn well it is not us. No amount of bravado, as we've learned over the past 500 years, will undo sexism and white supremacy. Hip-hop remains "illuminating, informative narration and its incredible ability to articulate our collective pain is an invaluable tool when examining gender relations" (Morgan 2017, 80). Megan's work allows us to explore the contemporary young Black woman's pain and pleasure right now. Using the space of hip-hop, historically a site where only "brothers [could] honestly state and explore the roots of their pain and subsequently their misogyny, sans judgment" (Morgan 2017, 80), Megan uses the space she's created to "lovingly address the uncomfortable issues of our failing self-esteem (see Megan Thee Stallion's "Body"), the ways we sexualize and objectify ourselves (see Megan Thee Stallion's "Sugar Baby"), our confusion about sex and love (see Megan Thee Stallion's "Captain Hook"),

and the unhealthy, unloving, unsisterly ways we treat each other (see Megan Thee Stallion's "Tina Montana")" (Morgan 2017, 80, parentheses mine).

Megan's innovation and indeed her advancement of a politic of pleasure is in many ways shaped by a messy relationship within the neoliberal structure of society. This relationship mirrors the proliferation of Black queer theory, itself a collection of ideas produced within neoliberal institutions of higher education. Like Megan, those of us doing Black queer theory in the academy sometimes find ourselves caught within institutions that both love and fear us; require our frequent disavowal of self for advancement, extract labor and in some cases joy from us to make themselves seem more "down."

When Meg raps in the song "Money Good" (Megan Thee Stallion 2019) "rent due, finna let ya baby daddy know," she captures the fantasies, and perhaps the realities of, Black people who have traded on their racialized sexuality and the assumptions of their "hypersexuality" so that they could "make ends meet." The very reason why Ma Rainey lamented losing her man and neglecting to ask God to send her two good men, was to pay the landlord. She sings, "Girls, take my advice. Ask the good Lord to help you twice." Meg has the good sense, however, to not put her faith in her man, and has what she needs to get someone else's man to pay her rent. We should not neglect the ethics here, but we should also not pretend that life under heteropatriarchal capitalism affords those at the bottom of various hierarchal arrangements to live outside of its contradictions. Indeed, while Meg does suggest an illicit relationship with a man who is presumably monogamously partnered with another person, she also reiterates that both she and he have an arrangement that is predicated on him playing a particular role—one that involves paying for the pleasure of her company. This arrangement allows her to extract capital from him while giving up very little in return. The extraction of capital from systems which are not intended for you, I would argue is one of the most fundamental aspects of Black queer life—one which requires an implosion of normative ideals.

44.5 "Fuck with the grays"

It might be worth asking about how race, gender, sexuality, and class were approached by the group of Black lesbian and/or bisexual feminists whose work is often subsumed under the rubric of "intersectionality." They sought through their work to "challenge homophobia and heteronormativity ... elucidat[ing] the complexities of identities through their own simultaneous embodiment as undeniably and inextricably black, female, and lesbian in ways that were consequential precursors to Kimberlé Crenshaw's conceptualization of 'intersectionality'" (Trimiko Melancon 2015, 4). Many of the Black women from whom Crenshaw draws her ideas of the "intersections" were radical Black lesbian and bisexual women. It's also important to note that just as Crenshaw samples the work of these women of color feminists that came before her, it is possible to sample Crenshaw's intersectionality without implying that intersectionality has outlived its utility. On the contrary, women of color feminisms as well as Crenshaw's intersectionality helped to usher in some of the most important Black queer theoretical interventions.

Now imagine that instead of a car accident occurring because of race, gender, sexuality, and class oppression colliding with one another, an intense orgasm occurred instead. Imagine a basement where at the bottom are only broke, basic bitches. In the top room is Megan and just below her, on the shoulders of the basic bitches are all the bad bitches who could say but for one thing—a rich husband or baby daddy, a new weave, some new titties, a viral video, or a bomb storyline on a popular reality show—they too would be in the upper room. I'm on some bullshit, but the point is this: we can keep sampling intersectionality, and pulling at it, and

arguing about it, but we need not treat it like a “holy grail” which cannot be built upon. Like blues, let’s keep doing it but in new ways.

We need [an intersectionality] that possess the same fundamental understanding held by any true student of hip-hop. Truth can’t be found in the voice of any one rapper but in the juxtaposition of many. The keys that unlock the riches of contemporary black female identity lie not in choosing Latifah [Crenshaw] over Lil’ Kim [Nash], or even Foxy Brown over Salf-N-Pepa. They lie at the magical intersection where those contrary voices meet—the juncture where “truth” is no longer black and white but subtle, intriguing shades of gray.

(Morgan 2017, 62, brackets mine)

Note

- 1 Megan Thee Stallion “Tina Snow” on Twitter, May 19, 2019. Last accessed: June 21, 2021, twitter.com/theestallion/status/1134454566014136320.

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PART IX

Rethinking intersectional justice



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INTERSECTIONALITY, ANTI-IMPERIALISM, ANTI-SEMITISM, AND THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE

Jasbir Puar

In recent years, since 2017, there has been an outcry from numerous quarters of the political spectrum regarding the proliferating use of intersectionality in social movements and political organizing. Both hailed and denounced, intersectionality has moved into mainstream venues of dispersion, from TED Talks to exhortations of “I am intersectional” to the adaptation and/or refutation of intersectionality for conservative, right-wing, and authoritarian agendas. How the call for intersectionality—which we could largely situate as “are we being inclusive?”—is reorganizing publics of debate and dissent is ever more pertinent at a time when claims to vulnerability are no longer the preserve of the powerless. Majoritarian and supremacist forms of victimhood drives the populist politics of hate in the US, Western and Eastern Europe, Israel, Turkey, Brazil, and India. Intersectionality is in fact now used to deride the radical left, declare that its proponents are anti-Semitic, and dismissed by leftists who cling to Marxist orthodoxy. Indeed, what Jennifer Nash calls “the intersectionality wars” in her luminous book *Black Feminism Reimagined* has perhaps shifted from a largely scholarly debate on the methodological and theoretical possibilities of intersectionality to an increasingly public debate in solidarity movement organizing about structures of oppression. Angela Davis’ assessment that “movements need to be intersectional”¹ decenters individual subject positions and the circular debate about identity politics and Marxism, foregrounding instead the crossings/coalitional capacities of movement-based practices. Intersectionality—both as a method and as a stance, indeed as a political demand—is what we could call intersectionality-as-antagonism and is also indicative of the “lure of intersectionality.”² Nash’s beckoning of a “radical anti-territoriality” that “[refuses] the proprietary relationships that mark black feminist engagement with intersectionality”³ (104) is a different kind of wish in the context of current politically charged antagonisms that seek to completely erase critical race theory and in fact denigrates any recourse to a politics of difference.

That movements now configure intersectionality as part of the lexicon of calling out privilege and claiming political grievance has provoked particular ire from Zionists of all political persuasions. Perhaps the most public of these denunciations comes from Alan Dershowitz, who in March 2017 exhorted: “All decent people must join in calling out intersectionality for what it is: a euphemism for anti-American, anti-Semitic and anti-Israel bigotry.” Titled “Intersectionality

is a Code-Word for Anti-Semitism,” the article from the now-disgraced, pedophile-affiliated Dershowitz claims that on college campuses, intersectionality has “forced artificial coalitions between causes that have nothing to do with each other except a hatred for their fellow students who are ‘privileged’ because they are white, heterosexual, male and especially Jewish.”⁴ In subsequent months and years there have been dozens of articles lambasting intersectional organizing in Jewish newspapers, including *New York Jewish Week*, the *New Jersey Jewish News*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *The Forward*, and *Lilith*.⁵ These have been followed by several academic articles and books of import, most pointedly from self-identified Jewish feminists.⁶

To what do we owe this bizarre conflation of intersectionality and anti-Semitism? What are the logics of race and identity embedded in such flattenings and how do these logics work politically and epistemologically? I am interested in these questions in part because I find myself in a curious nexus of thwarted interpellation as someone who is both out to somehow destroy intersectional thought (Nash) while simultaneously qualified as among the most virulent propagators of intersectionality by those who actually deeply wish its demise. My scholarly and political interest in this moment of the life trajectory of the intersectionality concept most sharply stems from the kinds of historical, epistemic, and ideological bifurcations performed by such accusations of anti-Semitism: the ongoing fissures along numerous racial fault lines between Jews and Black feminists, Jews and people of color, or even within Black feminisms. A final, critical consideration is the discursive abjection of Palestine that occurs in this lambasting, whether through intent, effect, or both.

In what follows I outline the contours of lament from a range of self-proclaimed Zionist Jews: queer and/or feminist Jews who constitute themselves as progressive; leftists who deride the demise of intersectionality from a proper scholarly analytic rooted in the experiences of Black women; right-wing Zionists who simply dismiss the validity of intersectionality as a mode of thinking through social differences writ large. While these different strands of complaint reflect a variety of investments or disenchantments with intersectionality and intersectional thinking, they do appear to converge at the conjecture that intersectionality “excludes” them. The “them” in question signals a spectrum of absences, from acknowledgment of the singularity of “the Jewish experience,” to the acceptance of Zionist identity within the scope of progressive movement organizing, to the recognition of anti-Semitism as a historical injury whose afterlife pervades contemporary reality. Though I offer my own counter reflections, I do not aim in this brief piece to proffer an assessment of these claims nor to adjudicate their validity. I seek primarily to schematize the parameters of a debate that will surely continue to escalate in the coming years. I do so in an effort to affirm the elastic transits of intersectionality from a theoretical analytic to a political organizing tool, while at the same time illuminating the conundrums that this extension might portend.⁷

In my reading of the nascent mainstream media and scholarly literature on Jewish people and intersectionality, I have discerned, to whatever extent possible given these debates are evolving rapidly in real time, the following accusations, all of which porously interlace each other.

The first accusation is that intersectionality as a political demand and expectation is causing fractures between African Americans and Jewish Americans in progressive movement organizing and represents a violation or rupturing of a long-standing history of Jewish American allyship with civil rights struggles for Black Americans. The flashpoint for this accusation appears to be the 2014 uprisings in Ferguson, Missouri, sparked by the murder of Michael Brown. Hashtags such as #FromFergusontoGaza and related slogans proliferated as protestors received advice from Palestinians on how to remedy teargas exposure and made connections between the militarized police siege in Ferguson and the conditions of occupation in Palestine. Black solidarity with Palestine thus appears to be a betrayal to progressive Jewish Americans. Decrying intersec-

tional organizing that insists on connecting apparently “unrelated struggles,” proponents of this critique bemoan the conflation of domestic or local issues about racial economic and social justice with a “foreign conflict.” This facile distinction is further expressed by schematizing domestic struggles as those against racism, patriarchy, heterosexuality, none of which, it is declared, have “substance or affinity with” the Palestinian struggle for self-determination.⁸ Zionists have also contested the specific part of the Black Lives Matter movement platform that explicitly names Israel as guilty of genocide and are also troubled by the Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine. Other initiatives that have caused offense include the Dream Defenders delegation to Palestine that took place in 2015 and a letter titled Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine from the organization Black for Palestine.⁹ Ferguson is therefore seen as a moment when Black Lives Matter and the Boycott Divestment Sanctions movement coalesce as an “anti-Israel” formation. The discomfort with intersectionality here is as much about Jewish Americans’ relationship to blackness as it is about the more common debate about what *kind* of whiteness Jews may or may not signify

Another grievance regards the position and role of Jewish feminists, queers, and trans people in feminist and queer organizing who agitate for the right to be recognized as feminist and queer Zionists who are “pro-Israel.” At the 2017 Chicago Dyke March, three queer activists carrying a rainbow flag superimposed with the Star of David were asked to leave the march.¹⁰ In 2017 the International Women’s Strike on March 8 called for the decolonization of Palestine, leading to discord amongst pro-Israel supporters.¹¹ In 2018 the Palestinian American Women’s Association and a number of other Palestinian and anti-Zionist Jewish organizations pulled out of the Los Angeles Women’s March because of the speaker selection of Scarlett Johansson, once a representative for the settlement-based company Soda Stream.¹² In December 2018 controversy about Zionist feminists erupted amongst the organizers of the Women’s March in D.C., an event formerly led by Tamika Mallory and Linda Sarsour who have both been denounced as anti-Semitic from both conservative and liberal quarters.¹³ However present these tensions are in contemporary organizing circuits, they are anything but new. Decades of debate about whether Zionism and feminism are reconcilable with or mutually exclusive from each other most certainly has not revolved around the purported dominance of intersectionality.¹⁴ Despite this enduring context, current-day attentiveness to intersectionality provides a master scapegoat object for an ahistorical assessment of these tensions.

A third condemnation is that intersectionality is anti-Semitic. What does this mean? To some, it means that the analytic itself is fundamentally anti-Semitic. To others, its usage is anti-Semitic, and perhaps most polemically, it is intentionally deployed as a mode of anti-Semitism. Some commentators state that the “current form of intersectionality has contributed to a sharp rise of anti-Semitism,” a staple line of argumentation that avows the prevalence of what is now being termed “left-wing anti-Semitism.”¹⁵ This charge is based on the claim that Jews do not occupy the position of white identity nor of white or racial privilege and are therefore not represented by the identity-parameters most relevant to intersectional resistance. In fact, Jews are discriminated against because of the failure of intersectionality to account for “Jews and the Jewish experience with antisemitism.”¹⁶ Being contested here is the perception that “Jews are viewed as representatives of whiteness.”¹⁷ This line of argumentation states that since racism and anti-Semitism are not the same, anti-Semitism itself is not part of the numerous “isms”—as in the holy triad of racism, sexism, classism—that intersectionally inflected activism seeks to redress, much less even affirm as a current-day occurrence.

Once again, the complex questions regarding Jewish racial formation and anti-Semitism long preceded the advent and deployment of intersectionality. Numerous historians have detailed the trajectory of Jewish American assimilation into whiteness.¹⁸ While an adjacent concern

is that Jews are excluded from the category “people of color,” this debate is as much as an “internal” matter to Jews as it is otherwise. When Jews are constituted as white, whether by Jews or by non-Jews, underlying such projections is the European Ashkenazi Jew, thus abjecting Black, Sephardic, Mizrahi and Arab Jews from the figuration of a “real” Jew.¹⁹ However, when (Ashkenazi) Jews claim not to be white, these Jews of color, who may well identify as “people of color,” again feel unseen, as explained in “What Jews of Color Hear when you say Gal Gadot is not White” by Black Jew Rebecca Pierce and Asian American Jew Mark Tseng-Putterman.²⁰ In fact Jews of color might claim that intersectionality does the opposite of exclude them—indeed, intersectionality allows them to highlight the differences of racialization amongst Jews and therefore mount a demand to be included and recognized as Jews by other Jews. A case in point: in “The Mizrahi-Palestinian Intersectionality Nobody’s Talking About,” Sigal Samuel writes about anti-Mizrahi oppression by other Jews, noting that to describe this oppression necessarily requires a kind of “proto-intersectionality.”²¹ In summation, the key points of debate here are whether Jews are white, people of color, or something not apprehensible by this binary; whether Jews suffer from systemic racism; whether Jews are capable of being white supremacists.

In thinking through these critiques, it is worth pausing on a few contextual items of note. First, all of these to some extent or another, explicitly or implicitly, appear to be reactions to a perceived *new* centrality of Palestinian solidarity connections. In the case of Ferguson, for example, the refrain “From Ferguson to Palestine” for some might represent a shift from long-standing relations between Black and Jewish Americans in social justice struggles historically as well as general support from Black Americans for the state of Israel. However, from Malcolm X to the Black Panthers to June Jordan to Angela Davis, Black–Palestine solidarity organizing has a long and rich history that predates Black Lives Matter. Nadine Naber’s work on alliances between Black and Arab feminisms from the 1970’s onwards is instructive here, as is a 2019 special issue of *The Journal for Palestine Studies* on Black–Palestine solidarity organizing edited by Mark Lamont Hill and Noura Erakat.²² Keith Feldman has detailed Black feminist June Jordan’s extensive participation in Palestine solidarity networks.²³ With special attention to her poetry on the 1982 Israeli invasion of the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Erica Edwards outlines the implications of Jordan’s politics for Black feminist activists more generally.²⁴ Importantly, these publications and other like-minded documentation of such histories emphasize not only the anti-racist but also the anti-imperialist thrust of these solidarity networks.

Second, the presentations of Jews as a monolith dismisses current-day activism of Jewish Americans in anti-racist and anti-imperialist social justice movement work. Jewish Voice for Peace, in fact, and not the use of intersectionality, could be credited for being the largest catalyst for the surge in Jewish American communities of explicitly anti-Zionist politics. One must also pay heed to the contributions of Jewish feminists to the theory of intersectionality, most notably Nira Yuval-Davis, who developed the idea of “situated intersectionality” in several publications in the aughts and onwards.²⁵ In representing Jews as a monolith, a conflation of Jews with the state of Israel and Zionist ideology prevails. Judith Butler, along with numerous other commentators, has long untangled this conflation, incisively noting that when instrumentalized to “defend Israel at all costs,” the “allegation” of anti-Semitism, especially when directed at other Jews, “is actually a cover for an intra-Jewish quarrel.”²⁶

In all cases, the commitment to and hailing of intersectionality is deigned the culprit responsible for the exclusions of these political positions, rather than the politics of these positions themselves being the cause of the exclusion. This scapegoating of intersectionality relies on the distinction between an old and a “new anti-Semitism.” In all cases there is a misread of intersectionality as driven by an identity of being a “progressive” who “sides with the underdog”

rather than united by politics, demands for structural redress, and anti-imperial resistance.” Most strikingly, in most cases (save Dershowitz), there is affirmation of the usefulness of intersectionality as it was “originally” intended, i.e., to illuminate the complexities of Black women’s oppression. This affirmation is typically followed by a repudiation of its current elastic usage, and a call to “restore the concept to its original meaning.” This is the unfolding narrative, then, of how the figure of the Black woman—who is obviously not aligned with Palestinian self-determination—is being misused to eject the liberal Zionist. What was once “the legitimate uses of intersectionality to shine a light on black women’s predicament,” Gabriel Noah Brahm claims, has devolved.²⁷ He continues:

Intersectionality’s roots in black feminism are deep and venerable, and its original insights are valid and significant, to be sure. What began as a way of talking intelligently about specific injustices to women of color, however, has lately spawned a new sect of victimology and cult of micro-aggressed martyrdom at large.²⁸

Here is a parsing of “progressive” Black feminist thought from the “radical feminist politics,” that “spawned the anti-Zionist and antisemitic uses/abuses of intersectionality.” This perceived movement—the spawning, in fact, a curious word that refers to unholy and prolific reproduction—from the righteous examination of “black women’s predicament” to the inclusion of Palestinian liberation apparently occurs at the expense of excluded liberal feminist Zionists who suffer from the lack of the intersectionality of Jewishness. This lament illuminates the deeply racist colonial anti-Black structures buttressing liberal white victimhood—in this instance refracted through Jewishness—that only grant recognition of Black women’s oppression as long as this concession does not lead to a political alignment with ... in this case, Palestine. Blaming intersectionality for the turn on college campuses to Palestinian solidarity and “against Israel” because Jews ... “don’t rate very high on the intersectionality scale,” Brahm claims that

Jewish women and queer Zionists ... [are the] sacrificial victims of black feminists’ legitimate wish to assert themselves conjoined to white feminists’ answering need to prove their progressive bona fides to their sisters of color by befriending the colonized Other.²⁹

Tellingly, in this statement the status of Palestinians as “the colonized Other” is unwittingly confirmed, and a distinction between “people of color” reified.

Taken together, these critiques of intersectionality by Zionists from all quarters reflect the proliferating use of intersectionality to signal the convergence of anti-racist politics with anti-settler colonial, anti-imperial politics, thus blurring any convenient bifurcation of the domestic from the international. While liberal, queer, and feminist Zionists claim to be “excluded” from intersectional organizing by virtue of growing solidarity networks with Palestine, the broader principal of what Angela Davis famously called “the indivisibility of justice” is at stake.³⁰

Notes

- 1 Angela Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2016).
- 2 Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 137.
- 3 Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 104. Nash’s interrogation of intersectionality as property is prefaced by the earlier concerns of feminists Marxists who understood property relations to

be embedded in the logic of intersectionality itself, a form of “infinite contractualism” that Angela Mitropoulos claims “proceeds by way of expanding the list of identities rather than asking why identification (as a premise of contractualism) as such is so significant to the organisation, recognition and transmission of value, even that construed as literary or (oppositional) political value.” As an inheritance then Intersectional identity is transmitted through the naturalization of biological transmission of rights and property and contracts the body to the future performance of this inheritance, as contracts are a projection of commitments. One therefore might understand the value of this contract as embedded in the assimilative forces of neoliberalism writ large, to which Nash responds by re-directing the contractual value of difference reflected in the “co-optation” intersectionality by institutions. Nash writes: “Yet rather than treat intersectionality’s conflation with diversity as evidence of practitioners’ inability to comprehend intersectionality’s complexity, I treat it as evidence of intersectionality’s elasticity, which has made it relatively easy to institutionalize, to act as insider knowledge, as institutional diversity project, and as evidence of the workings of so-called corporate university that has incorporated a particular kind of investment in difference.” Angela Mitropoulo, *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2012), 63; Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 25.

- 4 Alan Dershowitz, “‘Intersectionality’ is a code word for anti-Semitism,” *Washington Examiner*, March 30, 2017.
- 5 See Hannah Janol, “The Demons of Intersectionality,” *New York Jewish Week*, January 29, 2019; “Jews, Gays, and the Demonization of Israel,” *New Jersey Jewish News*, January 26, 2016; Batsheva Neurer, “The Narrative of Intersectionality Fails Jews,” *Jerusalem Post*, January 19, 2020; Batya Ungar-Sargon, “Intersectionality Has Abandoned Jews. Should We Abandon Intersectionality?” *Forward*, May 15, 2018; Melissa R. Klapper, “Jewish Feminists and Intersectionality: New Word, Old Story,” *Lilith*, October 17, 2017.
- 6 See Emily Jordan, “The Sound of Silence: what it means to be LGBTQ and a Zionist in today’s America,” *Salon*, August 6, 2017; Emily Shire, “Does Feminism Have Room for Zionists?” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2017; Anna Isaacs, “How The Black Lives Matter and Palestinian Movements Converged,” *Moment Magazine*, March 14, 2016; Sharon Nazarian, “By Rejecting Jews, Intersectionality Betrays Itself,” *Anti-Defamation League*, January 25 2018; Lily Herman, “Women’s March Leaders Have An Anti-Semitism Problem—Maybe It’s Time To Leave Them Behind,” *Refinery*, March 8, 2018; Karin Stögner, “Intersectionality and Antisemitism—A New Approach,” *Fathom*, May 2020; Emma Milner-Gorvine, “Anti-Semitism, Intersectionality, and Wokeness,” TED Talk, March 2020 https://www.ted.com/talks/emma_milner_gorvine_anti_semitism_intersectionality_and_okeness.
- 7 See coda in Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Revisited*.
- 8 Examples of this are in the articles listed in endnote 6.
- 9 See “Dream Defenders, Black Lives Matter & Ferguson Reps Take Historic Trip to Palestine,” *EBONY*, January 9, 2015; “2015 Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine,” www.blackforpalestine.com
- 10 Daniel Politi, “Gay Pride Marchers Carrying Star of David Flags Kicked Out of Chicago Parade,” *Slate*, June 26, 2017; Rachel Cromidas, “Tensions Flare After Chicago Dyke March Demands Star of David Pride Flag Carriers Leave Rally,” *Chicagoist*, June 26, 2017.
- 11 Emily Shire, “Does Feminism Have Room for Zionists?” *New York Times*, March 7, 2017.
- 12 Carlos Lazano, “Palestinian American group shuns L.A. Women’s March over Scarlett Johansson’s ties to Israeli company,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 20, 2018.
- 13 Anna North, “The Women’s March changed the American left. Now anti-Semitism allegations threaten the group’s future,” *Vox*, December 21, 2018.
- 14 Michael Fischbach has written an especially well-researched historical account of these debates within feminist organizing circles: see Michael R. Fischbach, “Chapter 12. Identity Politics and Intersectionality: Feminism and Zionism,” in *The Movement and the Middle East: How the Arab-Israeli Conflict Divided the American Left* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 184–200. Nira Yuval-Davis has a classic essay written in 1984 that was the focus on a special forum plus responses in *Feminist Review*: see Nira Yuval-Davis, “Zionism, Antisemitism and the Struggle Against Racism,” *Spare Rib*, September 1984 https://femrev.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/nira-yuval-davis_antisemitism-racism-zionism_spare-rib_sep-1984.pdf; special forum of *Feminist Review*, December 4, 2019: <https://femrev.wordpress.com/2019/12/>. See also: Brooke Lober “Conflict and Alliance in the Struggle: Feminist Anti-Imperialism, Palestine Solidarity, and the Jewish Feminist Movement of the Late 20th Century,” Ph.D. diss., (University of Arizona, 2016); Marla Brettschneider, *Jewish Feminism and Intersectionality* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2016); Nadine Naber, Eman Desouky, and Lina Baroudi, “The

- Forgotten ‘-Ism’: An Arab American Women’s Perspective on Zionism, Racism, and Sexism,” in *Color of Violence* (New York, NY: Duke University Press, 2020), 97–112.
- 15 David Israel, “Report: Growing Tendency to Disengage from Israel Exacerbates US Jews’ Identity Crisis,” *JewishPress.com*, July 9, 2019.
 - 16 Karin Stögner, “Antisemitism and Intersectional Feminism: Strange Alliances,” in *Confronting Antisemitism in Modern Media, the Legal and Political Worlds* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 75.
 - 17 Stögner, “Antisemitism and Intersectional Feminism,” 77.
 - 18 See Michael Paul Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996); Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks: and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998).
 - 19 Ghanem, A. (2009). *Ethnic Politics in Israel: The Margins and the Ashkenazi Centre* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203865040>
 - 20 Mark Tseng-Putterman and Rebecca Pierce, “What Jews of Color Hear when You Say Gal Gadot Isn’t White” *Forward*, June 30, 2017.
 - 21 Sigal Samuel, “The Mizrahi-Palestinian Intersectionality Nobody’s Talking about,” *Forward*, March 18, 2016. Here see also the corpus of work on Sephardic and Arab Jews by Ella Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims” *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 1–35. On Mizrahi feminism and intersectionality see Yaron Shemer, “Chapter 5: Intersectionality and Alliances” in *Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
 - 22 Noura Erakat and Marc Lamont Hill, “Black-Palestinian Transnational Solidarity: Renewals, Returns, and Practice,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 48, no. 4 (2019): 7–16. See also Nadine Naber, “Arab and Black Feminisms: Joint Struggle and Transnational Anti-Imperialist Activism,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 5, no. 3 (2016): 116–25.
 - 23 Keith P. Feldman, *A Shadow Over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
 - 24 Erica R. Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of US Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).
 - 25 Nira Yuval-Davis, “Situated Intersectionality and Social Inequality,” *Raisons Politiques* 2 (2015): 91–100.
 - 26 Judith Butler, “Judith Butler responds to attack: ‘I affirm a Judaism that is not associated with state violence,’” *Mondoweiss*, August 27, 2012. <https://mondoweiss.net/2012/08/judith-butler-responds-to-attack-i-affirm-a-judaism-that-is-not-associated-with-state-violence/>.
 - 27 In a recent issue of *Israel Studies* on “Word Crimes,” which takes as its structuring conceit the argument that words and concepts such as colonialism, occupation, apartheid, have been “misused” for anti-Israel agendas, Gabriel Noah Brahm writes on the keyword Intersectionality, describing the “radical feminist politics that spawned the anti-Zionist and antisemitic uses/abuses of intersectionality, the intersection of legal theory, women’s studies and antisemitism, and how selective intersectionality became an antisemitic instrument of abuse.” See Gabriel Noah Brahm, “Intersectionality,” *Israel Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019): 159.
 - 28 Brahm, “Intersectionality,” 157.
 - 29 Brahm, “Intersectionality,” 166.
 - 30 Angela Davis, “The Indivisibility of Justice” (Speech, Gallaudet University, February 14, 2013). www.northendagents.com/indivisibility-justice-angela-davis-speech-gallaudet-university/#:~:text=The%20indivisibility%20of%20justice%20requires,because%20of%20this%20ideological%20association.

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COMMERCIAL AFFINITY

“Intersectionality” and the limits
of “racial capitalism”*Michael Ralph*

The resurgence of interest in the role chattel slavery has played in US capital growth has been marked by an abiding emphasis on the Cotton Kingdom. Highlighting the 19th-century sector that arguably generated more wealth than any other—with enduring implications for governance and the management of difference—scholars have trained their emphasis on the Mississippi River Valley. One implication of this approach is that scholars have focused on the role between coercion and productivity, generally arguing for a direct correlation. That is, from Edward Baptist to Walter Johnson¹ and many others, the argument is that capitalist societies rely on violence and that increasing violence enhances productivity. The consequence is an emphasis on capitalism as a violent system and capital growth as a brutal process. The fact that social historians interested in *capital* and *slavery* in the emergence of *capitalist* societies have generally eschewed defining any of these key terms has only exacerbated the problem.

It is worth noting that the same period that witnessed tremendous brutality in the service of greater productivity in the US Cotton Kingdom witnessed unprecedented mobility and enhanced working conditions for enslaved workers in other industries, namely those operating in hazardous enterprises, artisanal professions, and those working as bureaucrats.² Violence constituted these dynamics, especially the structural violence and intimate partner violence that social scientists tend to associate with freedom in capitalist societies and not merely the naked force they tend to associate with chattel slavery. I am especially interested in slave mortgages, as they foreground the distinct forms of intimacy and partnership that emerged during this period alongside economic transformations that changed how enslaved people experienced affiliation and gained expertise, besides shaping how they were used as capital. I use the term “commercial affinity” to explain how violence and social mobility became intertwined in unprecedented ways during the last few decades of legalized slavery. But to understand these new configurations of coercive intimacy, we need concepts more pliable than what prevails in the scholarly literature, at present. More precisely, this chapter argues the scholarship on capital and social difference would be enriched by greater attention to “intersectionality,”³ a concept that Kimberlé Crenshaw developed precisely to make sense of the distinct forms of structural violence to which women of color are subjected.

For the past decade and a half, scholars have been using the term “racial capitalism” with increased frequency but not increased consensus.⁴ For some scholars, the claim is that capital

accumulation always involves racial exploitation. Others reserve “racial capitalism” for discrete moments when capitalism involves racialized exploitation and dispossession. While some scholars have called for greater clarity concerning what “racial capitalism” means,⁵ others have suggested that any operational definition for “racial capitalism” is likely to create more problems than it resolves.⁶

This chapter argues that the gravest limitation of “racial capitalism” as an analytic is not the array of uses to which it is put (even when they contradict each other): the signal limitation of “racial capitalism” is that it is not inherently intersectional. In fact, this chapter suggests that “racial capitalism” marks the evasion of an intersectional project forcefully articulated by the Combahee River Collective and extended by Kimberlé Crenshaw. In other words, despite the promise of “racial capitalism” as an analytic, scholars have squandered the opportunity to develop conceptual language for theorizing capital and social difference that is even more nuanced and even more intersectional, in the most ambitious sense. In other words, Jennifer Nash is wise to note that intersectionality has often been used as a litmus test for feminist scholarship rather than an opportunity to develop scholarship attentive to myriad forms of social difference.⁷ Taking Nash as my point of departure, this chapter seeks to revisit intersectionality with an eye for its pragmatic efficacy in understanding how capital works.

This chapter develops original insights about the forms of inequality that shape who has access to capital while showcasing the virtues of an intersectional approach modeled on the Combahee River Collective project. I began with a brief reflection on the world of Jenny Broxton, a free woman of color in antebellum Louisiana, to show how intimate relations shaped new commercial possibilities with the birth of what historians have called the “domestic slave trade,” or “second slavery.” Specifically, I ask how and why merchants moving to the Deep South after the Transatlantic slave trade was abolished in 1808 used slaves as collateral in financial transactions and mortgage agreements that gave them access to land in places like rural Virginia and Louisiana. In this context, a merchant’s assets might include a woman he had purchased several years prior, and raped, as well as their bi-racial offspring. In other words, establishing families with enslaved people did not prevent planters from claiming them as financial assets. Wielding violence in the most intimate ways, these merchants capitalized on the commercial value of their children and intimate relations. Some of these planters would eventually draft wills that bequeathed assets to the women and children they simultaneously treated as family and held in bondage, fostering social and economic mobility for these newly freed people of color in a peculiar paradox.

46.1 “Negroes were no longer real estate”

We know that Jenny Broxton was a respected member of society in Covington, Louisiana because the clerk of court, William Hosmer, attended her funeral. She was highly regarded at the church she attended and admired for being friendly and industrious by her large circle of friends.

Her daughter, Mitty (short for Matilda), would say that while her father, Phillip, was born in South Carolina, her mother, Jenny, was born in Africa. It was through Phillip that Jenny made her way to Louisiana.

Phillip had come to Louisiana in 1806 with his owners, Nathan and Mary Maples, leaving Jenny with Mitty and Phillip, Jr. Nathan Maples was so impressed by Phillip’s broad range of abilities during the voyage—and, no doubt, was grateful for the long and lucrative, if exploitative, relationship they had shared together—that he promised Phillip his freedom once the Maples got settled in Louisiana. The following year, Nathan went back to South Carolina, pur-

chased Phillip's wife, Jenny, and their two children from Henry Vaughn and brought them to Louisiana. Many of the women in the Broxton and Maples family would go on to have children with men like Phillip—wealthy white men who moved from the Upper South to the Lower South during the last few decades of legalized slavery. These men routinely treated the women they had children with and those children as collateral to banks so they could acquire loans to buy land. Meanwhile, they lived as families, growing the number of free people of color in rural parts of Louisiana like Covington, where this story takes place.

People who attended the Methodist Episcopal church with the family said that Jenny and her daughters—Mitty and Sarah—“dressed very well, as fine as any lady in the place.” Friends also recalled that Jenny “routinely gave parties and balls at their house in Covington from 1823–1836.” Jenny was a cook and also did laundry. Phillip worked in construction. In 1832, he delivered materials used to build Covington's first courthouse, receipt signed by Judge Jesse Jones. By this date, Phillip had already purchased five plots of land. Phillip died in 1838, and Jenny sold some of the land in 1841, five years before her Covington funeral where friends and loved ones praised her legacy and mourned her death.

But eight years later, John A. P. Maples—son of Nathan Maples—led some of Nathan and Mary's descendants in a legal effort to claim Mitty and Sarah as slaves, as part of their parent's estate. As I have noted, Nathan Maples felt so indebted to Phillip that he helped his wife and children join him in Louisiana. But John Maples claimed that Phillip and Jenny were never free to begin with. Following this logic, Mitty and Sarah were property the children of Nathan and Mary rightfully deserved to own.

In *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, W. E. B. Du Bois insists that the emergence of wage labor in the United States be theorized in terms of its relationship to chattel slavery. Yet, he was careful to note, ““No matter how degraded the factory hand, he is not real estate.” In highlighting the transformations that defined Emancipation, he revisits this crucial concept once again, “The family relations for the first time were legally recognized. Negroes were no longer real estate.”

Walter Johnson's 2008 edited volume, *The Chattel Principle*,⁸ exemplifies the prevailing view of slaves in the US—as chattel, like tools or furniture. But in New Orleans law, slaves were classified as real estate, a point Du Bois makes whether or not this example is what he had in mind.

These developments ask us to interrogate how legalized slavery shaped kin ties in a range of property transactions during the last few decades of legalized slavery. This is especially true with regard to slave mortgages. Rural merchants and farmers used enslaved people as collateral to acquire property in places where bonded human labor was scarce and land was abundant. But, as I have indicated, the enslaved people who surfaced in mortgages were sometimes the children and intimate partners—at other times, the friends and associates—of the planter who initiated this financial relationship. In making sense of the intimacy that defines people as real estate, it is crucial to revisit the unstable boundary between what people can and cannot own—and *when* they can be owned—that defines the historicity of capital.

In 1854, Mitty and Sarah swore, under oath, that on October 11, 1831, Nathan Maples sold Mitty and her only child, Rob, to Jenny for the full market price of the two enslaved persons. Jenny purchased Sarah and her three children (Annabella, Susan, and Mary Jane) on January 8, 1840.

But, as late as 1849, there are legal documents that describe Mitty and her children as enslaved, including estimates of their market value. Is it possible that, even as free people, court records continued to document the sale prices of African Americans? Or, did planters like Nathan Maples combine slave mortgages with other financial instruments, like insurance? Is it possible that Jenny persuaded Nathan to sell her children back to her by letting him keep insurance poli-

cies on their lives from which his estate would profit when they died (as in the case of Noah Davis, as discussed below)? If so, those insurance documents are lost to history. Perhaps they were even deliberately destroyed.

Phillip and Jenny had two additional children—Nancy and Phillip, Jr.—and negotiated with Nathan Maples to have them emancipated whenever their mother passed away. But, instead of heeding this request, Nathan’s oldest daughter, Elizabeth, must have made other economic arrangements. Elizabeth sold Nancy to Amy Baham in 1849, though Baham freed Nancy within a few years.

Whatever the specific details of the legal arrangement between Phillip and Nathan that brought Jennie, Mitty, and Sarah to Covington in 1807, it was more complicated than merely having freed the Broxtons from slavery. Court documents reveal that Nathan Maples only formally emancipated Jenny Broxton on November 26, 1825—18 years after she relocated to Louisiana. Phillip was not emancipated until the following year, on February 6, 1826.

Throughout their time in Covington, friends of Phillip and Jenny were aware that they did not always live together. They spent time together with their children, and entertained guests as a family—in fact, as noted above, the Broxton’s were known for the parties they threw and for in fact being what some courts record referred to as a “house of entertainment” for travelers passing through Covington. Though they were married and functioned as nuclear family unit, court documents suggest that Phillip and Jenny Broxton were not, in those early years, legally free. Instead, it seems that the initial legal arrangement Phillip had made with Nathan Maples was to allow Nathan Maples to lease he, Jenny, and their children to the bank as collateral for the loan he used to acquire land in Louisiana. Phillip worked in the city doing construction because he was apparently rented out by Nathan Maples until being formally emancipated years later. Jenny was, meanwhile, hired as a cook and laundress. Once Nathan repaid his loan to the bank, Phillip and Jenny were emancipated. They then made sure to emancipate their two oldest children before they died and to have the two youngest emancipated upon their death.

John Maples court case against Mitty and Sarah ultimately failed. The courts noted that his parents Nathan and Mary Maples had already passed away. Phillip and Jenny Broxton were also deceased. Everyone in Covington perceived Phillip and Jenny as free people. The courts accepted these observations as a matter of fact. But perhaps the most fascinating part of the story is that they were, in many ways, living as free people long before this was technically true.

46.2 “Our specific economic situation”

Although we are in essential agreement with Marx’s theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.⁹

—*Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977*

“We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974,” the members of the Combahee River Collective announce in their 1977 statement. But, they are careful to note that their commitment to grappling with social problems is no mere theoretical exercise. “The most general statement of our politics at the present time,” they tell us,

would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.

This insight, that distinct features of oppression are “interlocking,” is what prompted Kimberlé Crenshaw to develop the concept of “intersectionality.” Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has suggested that the CRC’s 1977 statement might well be the source of the prevailing insight that “identity politics” are integral to the way people make sense of the world. This insight is crucial to the way Crenshaw theorizes “intersectionality,” as evident in the 1991 *Stanford Law Review* article¹⁰ that inaugurated the concept:

This process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized the politics of African Americans, other people of color, and gays and among others. For all these groups, identity-based politics has been of strength, community, and intellectual development. The embrace of identity politics, however, has been in tension with dominant conceptions of social justice. Race, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges or domination—that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different. According to this understanding, our liberatory objective should be to empty categories of any social significance. Yet implicit in certain strands of and racial liberation movements, for example is the view that the power in delineating difference need not be the power of domination; it can instead be the source of social empowerment and reconstruction. The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently flattens or ignores intragroup differences.

Prompted by more careful attention to “intragroup” as well as “inter-group” difference, Crenshaw develops sustained attention to the way “race and gender intersect in shaping structural, and representational aspects of violence against women of color”—for our purposes, that violence includes the structural violence of capital accumulation, from the antebellum era to the present.

This makes it particularly disappointing that so much recent scholarly attention has centered on “racial capitalism.” Born from thorny debates about the role of race in apartheid exploitation during the 1970s,¹¹ Cedric Robinson’s 1983 *Black Marxism: The making of the black radical tradition* is the most widely cited text associated with this concept.

“The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology,” Cedric Robinson argues. “As a material force, then,” he continues “it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism.” Robinson thus uses the term “racial capitalism” to refer to the “development” of these “social structures.”

But the story of Jenny Broxton and her kin reminds us that age, gender, sexuality, generation, ability, expertise, and national origin play in shaping these “social structures.” The Combahee River Collective made this point forcefully in 1977, and Crenshaw elaborated it in 1991. Scholars who prefer the language of “racial capitalism” have not yet adequately explained what prompts them to go back to Robinson yet not back to the CRC and to move forward with “racial capitalism” without involving Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality.

One possible explanation for the evasion of intersectionality is that most scholars remain mired in a myopic form of misogyny that manifests as a belief that race and capital deserve priority in social science and that all other forms of social difference are optional. Instead, we might draw upon the CRC, Crenshaw, and others to delve more deeply into how the “interlocking” features of a person’s social “location” shape or inhibit social mobility.¹² To the extent that strate-

gies of capital accumulation inscribe and exploit people across diverse axes of difference, scholars ought to insist upon conceptual language adequate to that challenge.

Notes

- 1 Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told* (New York: Basic Books, 2014) and Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- 2 Michael Ralph, “The Value of Life: Insurance, Slavery, and Expertise,” in *The New History of American Capitalism*, edited by Sven Beckert and Chris Desan (New York (USA): Columbia University Press, n.d., pp. 257–281).
- 3 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 8 (1980): 139–67.
- 4 Michael Ralph and Maya Singhal, “Racial Capitalism,” *Theory & Society* 48 (2019): 851–81.
- 5 Steven Hahn, “The Arch of Injustice,” *Public Books*, February 16, 2021, accessed on May 15, 2022 at www.publicbooks.org/the-arch-of-injustice/.
- 6 Destin Jenkins and Justin Leroy, “Introduction,” in *Histories of Racial Capitalism*, edited by Jenkins and Leroy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).
- 7 Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
- 8 Walter Johnson, ed. *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).
- 9 Excerpt from “Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977,” as published in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, edited by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (New York: Haymarket Books, 2017).
- 10 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.
- 11 Peter James Hudson, “Racial capitalism and the dark proletariat,” *Boston Review*, February 20, 2018, accessed on May 15, 2022 at <https://bostonreview.net/forum/walter-johnson-to-remake-the-world/>.
- 12 My 2015 *Forensics of Capital* argues that any profile is simultaneously a forensic profile (to the extent that it is based on the legal standing of a person or polity) as well as a credit profile (to the extent that a person or polity is granted access to capital on the basis of a character assessment). We might further consider the increasing role of patient profiles, consumer profiles, and voter profiles in shaping social mobility given the outsized role of actuarial science, algorithms, and other data analytics in use by firms keen to render social practices into personalities.

47

TURNING ON INTERSECTIONALITY*

Lynn Mie Itagaki

Crossings are never undertaken all at once, and never once and for all.

—*M. Jacqui Alexander, Pedagogies of Crossing*

47.1 Signaling at the intersection

The problem with an intersection is that you can leave it. If one passes through it unscathed, the intersection has served its purpose and the unharmed drivers and pedestrians continue to go about their day. The intersection is thereby unmarked and unremarkable—forgettable—for its lack of collision.¹ With an accident, the intersection is hypervisible and unforgettable to those involved and its spectators. Pedestrians and drivers slow down to get a better view. If it's really bad, it might make the news.

Perhaps the billions of motorists and people who pass through intersections safely each day can help us metaphorically parse through frustrations with intersectionality both in its interchangeability with a glib form of “diversity and inclusion” as a public relations gambit, and its increasingly popular use in everyday conversations.

Of course, there are other metaphoric accidents and collisions in the interactions between and among people that are just as unforgettable, often in our neighborhoods, clubs, schools, and workplaces. One public site of collision is the legal system, in the court of law between the parties of a lawsuit just as local police and emergency personnel supervise the aftermath of a traffic accident. In her foundational essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw extends her memorable metaphor of the intersection as a complex form of analysis to depict the myriad ways a Black woman could be legally harmed by multiple discriminations in employment, but as a plaintiff, she can only argue one:

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 traveling 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.

(149)

Like the intersection that increases the probabilities of safe passages through averted collisions, the Black woman plaintiff may not experience the same likelihood of safety in all aspects as another non-Black worker might. The interactions of her everyday life might result in experiences of race or sex discrimination, compounded by others evaluating the situation who may not realize or intentionally ignore how different oppressions of race, gender, and sexuality—among many others—might have created the conditions of harm at this intersection itself.

This foundational example of the Black woman worker negotiating the many discriminations that exclude her from opportunities or hamper her earning potential and job satisfaction exemplifies the evasion around a recognition of intersectional injuries: conceding the multiple harms in order to argue for their incomprehensibility or negligibility. There is too much or not enough intersectionality to redress, or compensate. What happens when there is a car pileup and there is no one at fault? Or there is a crash that has been averted for the moment? If the intersection is unmarked or unremarked, does it exist? The intersection can be used to mask conflicts such as bad driving and moral failures and emphasize safe passages, not the harm at the side of the road or luckily averted. The intersection makes visible people with lines of transit at cross-purposes with each other, and for the intersection to work in increasing public safety and decreasing public harm, general turn-taking or accepted conventions of traffic signals need to be obeyed. But there's still road rage. What happens when we turn on intersectionality in order to *turn* on it?

47.2 Those collisions blocking the intersection, again

Matthew R. Alexander, 32; Samaria Blackwell, 19; Amarjeet Kaur Johal, 66; Jasvinder Kaur, 50; Amarjit Sekhon, 48; Jaswinder Singh, 68; Karli Smith, 19; and John Weisert, 74.

On April 15, 2021, around the 11 p.m. shift change at the Mirabel Road FedEx Ground facility near the Indianapolis International Airport, a 19-year-old white male gunman and former employee opened fire on workers outside and inside the facility before killing himself. He shot and killed four people in the parking lot and four more people inside. Seven more were injured, four by gunfire. Five women were murdered: white, Black, and Asian, three of whom were Sikh. One was a grandmother, and the two others were middle-aged relatives who drove to work together and were the breadwinners of their families. Three men were also murdered: one Sikh, two white (Williams 2021).

Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) community activists and allies argued on local and national airwaves that the man's crime was racially motivated (Moshtaghian and Holcombe 2021). Acts of anti-Asian racism and violence were at high and increasing numbers in spring 2021, as it had been since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic a year earlier. At this second-busiest hub of FedEx Ground in the US, 90 percent of the workforce were Sikh, and “[g]enerations of Sikh Hoosiers have worked at the FedEx facility” (DePompei 2021). But law enforcement officially refused to connect the mass shooting to racism despite the shooter's 200 of 175,000 personal computer files of “mainly World War II, Nazi type propaganda” and “German military, German Nazi things” (DePompei 2021) but this browsing history “wasn't cause for concern and the investigation is closed” (Venkatraman 2021, my emphasis).

Moreover, the FBI officially stated, the shooter “did not appear to have been motivated by bias or desire to advance any ideology” (DePompei 2021) despite his apprehension by the police a year earlier, after his mother was concerned for *her* life and his and thought that he would “suicide by cop” with his new, legally purchased rifle (Moshtaghian and Holcombe 2021). During

that time his computer had white supremacist websites open when he was taken into custody for this mental health check, and these visible sites concerned him enough that he explicitly asked for someone to turn off his computer (Moshtaghian and Holcombe 2021). The same FBI statement insisted that “there was no indication that there was any animosity towards the Sikh community, or any other group for that matter” (DePompei 2021). Because law enforcement didn’t find any websites specifically targeting Sikhs or South Asians, their murders could not be racially motivated. This, despite the South Asian community being targets of not only anti-Asian racism before and during the pandemic but also anti-Muslim and anti-Middle Eastern sentiment, heightened since 9/11.

The perpetrator also wanted to join the military. Perhaps he wanted to enlist so he could legitimately murder others. According to the FBI special agent, the perpetrator acted “in a way he believed would demonstrate his masculinity and capability while fulfilling a final desire to experience killing people” (DePompei 2021). Essentially, he *happened* to kill other men, women and Sikh workers in his violent expression of masculinity.

The workplace is a site of conflict, an intersection. For the white male perpetrator, he could only win or “demonstrate his masculinity and capability” by killing some of his former coworkers, the majority of whom killed were women and BIPOC (DePompei 2021). This white violence has appeared before in anti-immigrant attacks, US foreign policy, white settler colonialism, US-European imperialism, African chattel slavery. A month earlier on March 16, 2021, eight day spa workers and customers in Atlanta and a nearby town—six of whom were Asian immigrant women—were shot and killed by another white male perpetrator who felt he had to erase the temptation these women posed to the (white) Christian sexual purity his family and church demanded (Bauerlain and McWhirter 2021). The first of these murders were committed near the shooter’s hometown in a county named after the Cherokee Nation whose ancestors were dispossessed and disappeared on the Trail of Tears in the 1830s, when Georgia was cleared for white settler colonialists and enslavers.

We’ve heard this story and seen this movie before about white criminals and outcasts who use genocidal violence to make a better world for themselves and other whites: cowboys, rogue cops, outlaws, vigilantes, soldiers, enslavers, and settlers. And we see the audiences and the criminal punishment system turn away from this murderous brutality because these violent types allegedly built the American nation: confirmed in the patriotic songs sung and in the origin stories of statehood and the founding of the Republic told to children. In our default modes of “percepticide” (Taylor 1997, 122) and “colonial unknowing” (Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein 2016), we are encouraged by statues and names of public buildings and spaces to celebrate these men and women.

In the murders at the Indianapolis FedEx facility, refusing to tell the story of a white man with a gun who read up on white supremacist organizations as the perpetrator of racist, patriarchal violence obscures yet again a white (male) pathology,² and instead the discourse is subsumed into the overwhelming anonymity of hundreds of acts of fatal gun violence and mass shootings that have become disturbingly routine and simultaneously an accepted fact of BIPOC urban life in America. In essence, law enforcement and the criminal punishment system say no collision happened and in fact, no intersection exists: the shooter cannot express explicit anti-Sikh, anti-Black, anti-woman, and anti-elder intent because allegedly white supremacy is a generalized and unspecific hatred toward BIPOC, white settler colonialist violence is in the past, US imperial violence is foreign not domestic policy that occurs outside US borders, and gender violence is not a hate crime. Those roads at the intersection have been blocked off. These dead join the many illegible victims of racism, misogyny, queer-/transphobia, xenophobia, religious intolerance, ableism, and ageism, those who the criminal punishment system refuses to make visible on these terms.

The official statement of finding no racial bias tried to disappear teenager Karli Smith from the Black victims killed by white perpetrators and self-appointed law enforcers. It tried to disappear anti-woman motivations in the deaths of five women, teenagers to senior citizens. It tried to disappear ageist motives against all four Sikh workers between 48 and 66 and one white man, 74, a retired engineer who was trying to pay off household debt (Williams 2021). It tried to disappear a homicidal masculinity in a show of dominance against other white men. As one in hundreds of gun violence and the 46th mass shooting in April 2021 alone, the victims and their communities that mourned them were officially denied the place of coming together along these lines of understanding.

47.3 The basement as the bottom

What is the infrastructure holding up the intersection and supporting everyday life? Whose oppressions are buttressing others' relative privileges?

Often unacknowledged, intersectionality is the tale of two metaphors in Crenshaw's landmark essay "Demarginalizing the Margins," the one of intersection foregrounded by the term itself, the other one of a basement. In "Basements and Intersections," Anna Carastathis's important reading recovers and emphasizes the other largely overlooked metaphor Crenshaw develops alongside "intersection." The popular circulation of intersections as the obvious, easily grasped metaphor for intersectionality obscured the other grounding one of the basement:

In leaving the basement behind, the intersection may have become a more mobile traveling metaphor, but at the risk of forgetting Crenshaw's crucial account of how social hierarchy is reproduced through the law and in political movements that use essentialist, monistic categories.

(2013, 699)

There are those who receive safe passage, whether through the intersection or up from the basement. Their safety still requires advocacy, but those advocating for them are differently situated, closer to the top or bottom of the hierarchy, which usually means they are more likely to win or lose debates over more or less inclusion, more or less protections from harm, or more or fewer resources, respectively.

Crenshaw tells the allegory of a basement

which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked—feet standing on shoulders—with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling.

(Crenshaw, 1989 151)

The floor above is for "only those who are *not* disadvantaged in any way and those whose heads "brush up against the ceiling ... can crawl" into this room. In this allusion to the exploitation inherent in the pyramid scheme of capitalism, Crenshaw develops a powerful narrative of hierarchies in which we organize human life and accord value:

Yet this hatch is generally available only to those who—due to the singularity of their burden and their otherwise privileged position relative to those below—are in the

position to crawl through. Those who are multiply-burdened are generally left below unless they can somehow pull themselves into the groups that are permitted to squeeze through the hatch.

(151–2)

These people stuck at the lowest levels of life chances and opportunities are for Derrick Bell, the recognition of the “faces at the bottom of the well” or for Mari Matsuda, the ethical heuristic and method of “looking to the bottom.” Those at the bottom deserve the critical and political attention of researchers and policymakers. What Grace Kyungwon Hong theorizes as “surplus” and Jodi Byrd, Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Melamed, and Chandan Reddy as “economies of dispossession” expose how hierarchies depend on these lowest economic quintiles for upward extraction through administrative or bureaucratic processes framed in ostensibly race-neutral language, stripped of their racist origins, rooted in enslavement and settler colonialism which all perpetuate further exploitation. In socioeconomic terms, those pulled through the hatch to the floor above in Crenshaw’s basement metaphor index the increasingly multiracial middle class with less-restricted access to education, employment, and home ownership.

47.4 Provisions and revisions

Leslie McCall posits intersectionality as three forms of complexity in analyzing a category of identity: anticategorical, intracategorical, and intercategorical complexities. Anticategorical complexity recognizes the instability of the category itself to impossibility, intracategorical complexity examines the internal heterogeneity of the category, and intercategorical complexity connects the internal heterogeneity of a category to that within another category (1773–4). While anticategorical complexity is less prevalent than it was a generation ago, intracategorical and intercategorical complexities appear, the latter to a lesser extent and the one in which McCall exhorts for more research to be done (1775, 1784–9).

Research studies and legal and policy remedies have more often than not disappeared those in the overlapping categories.³ One of the concerns with deploying McCall’s framework of intracategorical and intercategorical complexities is that in time-honored ways, in comparing internal subsets (intracategorical) or subsets between categories (intercategorical), the more-privileged subsets gain more attention. For racial or gender analyses of Blacks or women, as Crenshaw writes, middle-class Black men and middle-class white women, respectively, will be most visible and deemed representative of each group:

I want to suggest further that this single-axis framework erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification, and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group. In other words, in race discrimination cases, discrimination tends to be viewed in terms of sex- or class-privileged Blacks; in sex discrimination cases, the focus is on race- and class-privileged women.

(140)

Black women, as well as working class, working poor, or unhoused Blacks and whites are pushed again into invisibility.

Because a violent masculinity of homicidal dominance has no specific racial target, because the victims were racially diverse, the eight Indianapolis FedEx lives lost are not officially counted as victims of white supremacist violence, nor are the thousands of mass shooting victims every year. Intersectionality under these circumstances has been foreclosed.

47.5 Safer passages

Why have anti-Asian hate crimes been such a shock to non-Asians and APIDA themselves? In a March–April 2021 survey, 37 percent of whites, 30 percent of Blacks, 24 percent of Latinxs, and 13 percent of Asians said they are unaware of an uptick in hate crimes against Asian Americans (LAAUNCH.org).

Why has there been a lack of community knowledge and survival strategies for Asian Pacific Islander Desi Americans? Leslie Bow identifies Asian Americans as “partly colored” within the racial hierarchy under the dictatorship of Jim Crow segregation. Because Asian Americans have been perceived as partly colored, does this mean that they are partially included in other racial groups or that they are only partly interpellated into a clearly demarcated racial hierarchy? This partial inclusion can function as an honorary whiteness, but there are some ways in which it functions as an “honorary” Blackness as well. Which water fountain or restroom did my 20-year-old Japanese American grandfather from Hawai‘i use in the US Army bootcamp in Fort Hood before he was sent overseas to fight in Italy and France and then supervise the closing of the European concentration and death camps until 1946? He was in a segregated regiment of other Japanese Americans himself. I wonder if he, like a young Hisaye Yamamoto, journalist and short storyist, when confronted by the choice, used the white bathroom instead of the “Colored” one.

I am alive, unincarcerated, food secure, housed, in a full-time job with benefits like affordable health care and retirement savings: I, like many of my friends and colleagues, have stood on others’ shoulders and have passed through most hatches of most basements. Why has my passage—my survival and flourishing—thus far been relatively safe, less contested, or less marked?

To extend the metaphor of Crenshaw’s basement, do I return to the hatch to help pull up more left behind as others have pulled me up before? The answer appears, at first glance, an obvious and resounding yes.

Thinking metaphorically and acting accordingly, scholars working with categories of identity allegorically proceed in a similar process. The categories of race, gender, sexuality, class, citizenship status, religion, among many others are posited, operational spaces cleared around those with the most privilege within an overlooked identity, and then those marginalized within that identity category are sometimes pulled into visibility.

But what if my help is instead a demand for categorization that will further the violence already structuring the conditions of life in the basement? What if this visibility is refused because the terms of existence through the hatch are impossible within which to survive and flourish?

Cathy Park Hong’s book, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* underscores this quandary for APIDA communities. While anti-Asian racism might appear as less statistically manifest with lower incarceration rates and higher average household income and wealth, APIDAs have not experienced bias and discrimination as “minor.” On one hand, the “Asian American Reckoning” of Hong’s title is the fuller realization of the scope of racial injury and trauma Asian Americans have experienced and the deep connection APIDAs have to other groups’ racialized histories. On the other, this metaphor of a racial reckoning presupposes a period of time before the moment of judgment and the possibility of an Asian American state of racial ignorance.⁴ A racial reckoning requires a racial consciousness to develop from one’s own interracial conflicts and connections.⁵ And even when recognizing the deep-seatedness of anti-Asian hate, there might not be a parallel or intersecting *interracial* reckoning. The progress from innocence to reckoning can point toward a developing understanding of how APIDAs are interpellated within a history of US racism and settler colonialism. Whether a monoracial or interracial reckoning, both are uncomfortable privileges of an uneven hierarchy that determines degrees of inclusion and exclusion, protections and harms, more or fewer resources. For some Asian Americans, the possibility exists for an uncomplicated ignorance that one’s survival and

flourishing does not require continual racial disciplining, negotiation, and vigilance. For some Asian Americans as well as other light-skinned, Standard English-speaking, wealthy, or honorary white folks of all racial heritages, they have passed through these intersections for years, decades, lifetimes, relatively unscathed, perhaps a minor scare or averted accident, but nothing that called the police, ambulances, and fire trucks in. No one was arrested. Nothing involved the morgue.

47.6 The basement is a mass grave, the intersection is its memorial

The intersection memorializes the generations who have passed before us and been driven off the road. The intersection is the site of numerous accidents as well as the sacred grounds of souls lost and traumas endured. The metaphor of the basement reminds us of this deep and wide history of institutional violence—legal precedence and exclusionary laws which sanctioned theft of labor, land, and personhood to multiply oppressed generations upon generations. This intersectional history of generational oppression filters through the metaphors of BIPOC activists throughout the centuries of which the basement is one. Benjamin E. Mays exhorted Black folks to rise because “We, today, stand on the shoulders of our predecessors who have gone before us.” Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga coalesced women of color feminists to recognize women’s labor across generations in “this bridge called my back.” Toni Morrison reminded international audiences of America’s unredressed history of slavery in which enslaved people remained unremembered, not even memorialized by a bench by the side of the road for passersby to rest and remember. Bell and Matsuda oriented critical race theory toward centering those at the “bottom.” Christina Sharpe emphasized lives lived “in the wake.” The labor and land acknowledgments we speak and write remind our hearers we live and learn on the shoulders of those disappeared and dispossessed.

I am alive and unharmed despite a history of anti-Asian racism. I am alive because of the early deaths and worn-out bodies of my immigrant ancestors in the illegally annexed territory of Hawai‘i who, upon arrival, were not only exploited as economic migrants and the global poor on plantations but also were settler colonists who displaced Native Hawaiians and whose descendants continue to do so.

I am alive and unharmed despite the eight deaths in Indianapolis. Despite Atlanta’s six Asian immigrant women who were targeted and murdered one month earlier. Despite those who were assaulted and murdered before and since the pandemic and its increasing anti-Asian racism.

Discussing this life and these deaths requires intersectional analyses that have been foreclosed by official investigations and public statements rather than contextualized by historical traumas. We continue to miss intersectionality when we can only see it through the accidents or conflicts rather than all those that were averted or when we decide the multicar pileup is too complex to determine causality or make the conditions safer for those likely to be harmed next. Turning on intersectional analyses means turning toward the hatch and the mass grave below.

Daoyou Feng, 44; Hyun Jung Grant, 51; Suncha Kim, 69; Paul Andre Michels, 54; Soon Chung Park, 74; Xiaojie Tan, 49; Delaina Ashley Yaun, 33; and Yong Ae Yue, 63.

Notes

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- 1 I use “unmarked” and invisible in that power is strongest when it cannot be identified. Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), she wryly comments that if visibility meant power, then young underweight white women would rule the world: “The ubiquity of their image, however, has hardly brought them political or economic power” (10). Those white patriarchal institutions which profit most from their images are rarely noticed or criticized.
- 2 The pathology of whiteness is a collision at an intersection that refuses to be named. Instead, politicians and policymakers have focused on Black pathology in a refusal of how racism harms everyone involved, for generations, albeit unevenly. As one of many discussions, see Bell and Clark.
- 3 Crenshaw identifies this repeated failure:

“This focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination. I suggest further that this focus on otherwise-privileged group members creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon” (140).
- 4 I thank Wendy Allison Lee for her insights on this genre.
- 5 For a further discussion of negotiations amid interracial hierarchies, see Itagaki, *Civil Racism*.

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OWNING YOUR MASTERS (TAYLOR'S VERSION)

Postfeminist tactical copyright and the erasure of Black intellectual labor

*Anjali Vats*¹

Taylor Swift is having a good run. Her re-releases of *Fearless* and *Red* generated impressive sales and critical praise, as did her new releases of *folklore* and *evermore*. From red velvet wedding cakes to viral Jake Gyllenhaal memes, it is hard to imagine how Swift's presence in the American popular cultural lexicon could be stronger. Though some critics have heralded the arrival of a remade and more "mature" Taylor Swift, others claim "Taylor Swift Knew Everything When She Was Young."² The mere fact of this debate highlights a notable turn: Taylor Swift has more fans than ever,³ on account of her music and now her politics. Though scholars and activists have long critiqued the talented Swift for engaging in neoliberal post-feminist politics that reinforce racial divides,⁴ her new battle has earned her respect even among skeptics.⁵ This is not terribly surprising. As Sarah J. Jackson observes, audiences and critics have become increasingly obsessed with the political platforms of celebrities,⁶ including the inimitable Swift. This chapter turns a critical eye to one aspect of Swift's newfound popularity: her decision to draw on (white) feminism to take a stand against record company economic exploitation and gender discrimination by rerecording and rereleasing the first six albums in her catalog. I complicate the story that came out about Swift's struggle to "own her masters," by examining its racial implications against the larger backdrop of the "sonic color line"⁷ and the structural inequalities that flow from it. In the following pages, I demonstrate how attending to race and gender can help illuminate the historical trajectories of the racial politics of ownership in the music industry and how Black feminist ethics have aided in reimagining copyright practices, even as they benefit white women.

In defining intersectionality and subsequently examining the benefits and costs that accrue from Swift's white femininity, I draw on Devon Carbado's elaboration of Kimberlé Crenshaw's work, Cheryl Harris' classic piece on "whiteness as property,"⁸ and the developing area of critical race intellectual property (CRTIP),⁹ an interdisciplinary body of scholarship and activism that examines and contests the racial inequalities in intellectual property law using critical race theory (CRT) as a starting point. Intersectionality is an important tool for CRTIP scholars because it highlights multiple forms of inequality in intellectual property law.¹⁰ While it is an analytic that is often deployed to center the experiences of Black women, Carbado emphasizes that it is

useful in examining the intersections of *all* categories of identity with respect to oppression, not only Blackness and femininity. He observes that “[c]olorblind intersectionality refers to instances in which *whiteness* helps to produce and is part of a cognizable social category but is invisible or unarticulated as an intersectional subject position.”¹¹

I interpret this as a call to understand how white femininity intersectionally *enables* certain types of (intellectual) property-based storytelling that effectually minimize, even erase, preceding histories of Black social protest. While Swift’s music industry moves are frequently treated in the popular press as novel and groundbreaking, I argue that they were made possible by three intersecting phenomena: 1) the persistent ownership protests of Black artists and activists, propelled by radical Black feminists, whose liberatory intellectual labor paved the way for famous musicians including Bessie Smith, Dionne Warwick, Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder, Prince, and Tina Turner to succeed in their daunting struggles to gain control over their masters; 2) the composition/recording distinction enshrined in the Sound Recording Act of 1971, that operates primarily to the benefit of white people; and 3) Swift’s postfeminist self-styling as an innocent and wholesome but flawed all-American singer-songwriter who is also a skilled entrepreneur. I coin the term *postfeminist tactical copyright* as a theoretical lens for understanding how and why some copyright interventions implicitly entrench the privileges associated with whiteness at the expense of people of color, frequently Black people, through invocations of (white) postfeminist and neoliberal capitalist rationales, e.g., narratives of individual fairness and carceral empowerment, as a means of pushing for material gains. These gains are not only frequently divorced from larger racial justice struggles because of their meritocratic emphasis on the individual as the site of struggle, they intentionally and unintentionally instrumentalize those moments of historical protest as stepping stones for success. In making this argument, I consider the narrative of feminist liberation that Swift has advanced in performances and interviews and on social media as well as media coverage of her and her master record controversy over the years.

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom (2020) and *Cadillac Records* (2008), two films that call attention to the struggles Black artists faced in the music industry in the early to mid-1900s, particularly with respect to ownership rights, showcase that Black oppression and white success are often inversely related, with empathy for the dispossession of Black musicians rarely taking center stage in crafting copyright law or industry practice.¹² Swift’s white womanhood aids in marking her as an aggrieved party in a system of intellectual property protection that scholars such as Rebecca Tushnet, Sonia Katyal, and Ann Bartow have demonstrated is deeply sexist in its presumptions about the natures of creativity, culture, and property.¹³ But it also marks her as a figure privileged by her race, gender, and class who builds her resistance on past labor invested in combatting exclusion, using methods that are steeped in liberal individualism and exploitative capitalism. Understanding the interconnectedness of her struggle with the struggles of those who came before, using the theoretical lens of intersectionality, is a necessary step in building more egalitarian copyright regimes. While scholars including Kevin J. Greene, Olufunmilayo Arewa, Madhavi Sunder, and Keith Aoki have discussed the racial politics of copyright law at length, they have largely focused on the dispossession that *people of color* have faced due to intersectional oppression and structural exclusion.¹⁴ This chapter centers the *benefits* that accrue from white femininity, even in a copyright system that is biased against women of all identities, reading it in relation to the earlier and later struggles of Black artists to own their masters. It thus highlights the need for multifaceted contextual and relational approaches to intersectionality that sometimes focus on the privileges of whiteness, especially when considering celebrity, music, and property across matrices of domination.¹⁵

48.1 Taylor takes on industry

On April 9, 2021, Taylor Swift released the first of six rerecordings of albums that made her a star, beginning with her second, originally titled *Fearless* and now titled *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*. As with everything in the Swiftian universe, her choice is meaningful: she picked an album that speaks to her lack of fear as the lead release in a series through which she will advocate for her (intellectual) property rights. These new versions will all bear the phrase “Taylor’s Version” in their titles, establishing a new subbrand of Swift’s own music. The possessive in the title highlights the fact that Swift will own the copyrights for the sound recording masters (“masters”) of these new releases unlike with the versions she released on Scott Borchetta’s Big Machine Label Group. This is because Swift signed away the copyright to her masters in order to get a record deal, as is common in the music industry, while maintaining co-authorship rights in her musical compositions. Instead of trying to recover these sound recording masters from the two men that Swift has accused of industry bullying and sexual harassment, she has chosen to create and market a new product, i.e., rerecorded versions of her own musical compositions, branded as the same but different and (post) feminist “Taylor’s Version.”

In the United States, the separation of rights in sound recordings and musical compositions is deeply intertwined with the structural racism through which white people have advanced sonic racial capitalism and Black people were/are deprived of (intellectual) property rights. Copyright law in the United States originates with Article III of the Constitution, which affords Congress the power “[t]o promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries.”¹⁶ The federal legislative implementation of that language has been punctuated by intense cultural and political battles, including about the definition of the “sound recording” and its racial exclusions of those who did not own sheet music. Swift has only recently found herself in the middle of those battles, though she has previously received a great deal of attention in the media for her enactment of (white) feminist politics.¹⁷ Her rerecordings represent a notable embrace of her younger self, the musician who wrote the music she now seeks to control. The *Atlantic*’s Spencer Kornhaber lays out the stakes of the conflict:

[f]ans, radio DJs, TV producers, and anyone else who wants to use old Swift songs now have a choice of which versions to pick. By declining to substantively tweak her music, Swift minimizes the role of aesthetic preference in that decision. The question becomes: Do you support the person who sings and writes the songs you enjoy, or do you support her enemies?¹⁸

While I personally hear Taylor’s Version of *Fearless* as musically quite distinct from the Big Machine version, Kornhaber’s point is well taken: Swift’s public commentaries on (intellectual) property ownership allowed her to enact a strategy of postfeminist tactical copyright.

Postfeminism is a term that race and media scholars have taken up in great depth, particularly in the context of celebrity. In its broadest sense, as Sarah Banet-Weiser, Catherine Rottenberg, and Rosalind Gill write, it can be understood as a feminist *sensibility* advanced through neoliberal capitalism and popular culture.¹⁹ The term *sensibility* highlights that postfeminism operates as an evolving set of “ideas, images, and meanings,”²⁰ including “affect, public mood, atmosphere, or structure of feeling.”²¹ Postfeminism is about selling *more*, not less, and treating those sales as the path to attaining power as a woman. Julietta Hua echoes this, noting that “post-feminism lauded the difference of the female sex and advocated female (hetero)sexual difference as a source of women’s power over men.”²² Yet she cautions that “the articulation of post-feminism offered by Naomi Wolf, Camille Paglia, Christina Hoff Summers, and others relies on national

and racial politics that remind us that feminisms are not, by virtue of being 'feminist,' supportive of oppositional politics."²³ This is because embrace of the post-feminist frequently also entails the embrace of "colorblindness" and "multiculturalism," in order to consolidate commodity value.²⁴ Postfeminism centers the (white) "feminine" at the expense of other markers of identity, e.g., race, class, and disability, as a means of creating broadly marketable human products. Erasing one's identity – or at least rendering it innocuous – is one way to achieve, as Ralina Joseph writes, the postfeminist goal to become "every woman who embodies a universal appeal because of her positioning as a liberal, democratic, colorblind subject."²⁵ In this neoliberal feminist context, Robin James persuasively contends, even resilience can be commodified. The refusal to be broken is a marketable consumptive object in itself.²⁶

Swift embodies the postfeminist ideal in countless ways, including her capacity to sell records even when she is the subject of derision for her performative politics, romantic scorn, and racist actions. She is the queen of revenge and reinvention who refuses to be beaten. With these observations as the starting point, I seek to understand postfeminism as the lens through which she articulates her tactical goals in the context of copyright law, where tactical refers to the practice of strategically deploying "subject position as an access point"²⁷ for achieving larger goals. Tactical, as I use, it here connotes intentionality, though not maliciousness, as well as awareness of self-identity that facilitates both politics and performance in a given space, e.g., copyright negotiations. Swift's copyright struggles began as a teenager, when she entered the Nashville country music scene. The daughter of two financial professionals, she grew up in an idyllic part of Pennsylvania, on a Christmas tree farm that her father bought from a client. There she got involved in theater before learning to play guitar at age 12. Swift benefited from her father's ability to support her budding career as a country musician by transferring to Merrill Lynch's Nashville office when she was 14 years old. Borchetta signed Swift with his local indie label, Big Machine, two years after the move, in 2004, in exchange for assignment of rights to Swift's sound recording masters. This, of course, has been a common practice within the music industry since its beginnings in the early 20th century.²⁸ Then in 2019, Scooter Braun's Ithaca Holdings acquired Big Machine, including the exclusive rights to the masters of all of the work that Swift had recorded since her teens, or six albums.²⁹ That *Braun* purchased these rights was particularly galling to Swift, who accused him of engaging in a misogynistic bullying campaign against her.³⁰ She took to social media to express her disappointment and anger that he was now in a position to economically benefit from her artistic labor, without her permission or approval. Braun fired back, suggesting that Swift was being difficult and intransigent. He maintained that he had given her the opportunity to "buy back" her masters if she remained with Big Machine but that she refused to do so despite a purportedly generous offer.³¹

In late 2020, Braun flipped Swift's masters portfolio, along with other Big Machine holdings, selling them to private equity company, Shamrock Holdings, for \$300 million.³² This move is part of a long history of buying and selling the rights in sound recordings and musical compositions,³³ the politics of which first became the subject of intense public debate in the US when Michael Jackson bought a 50 percent share of the ATV music catalog in 1985. Unlike Swift, who is seeking return of rights in her sound recordings because she already holds co-authorship rights in the musical compositions, Jackson purchased rights to the musical compositions that had been assigned to ATV. He thus gained control of the lucrative publishing rights attached to the catalog, which allowed him to control when and how the underlying compositions he owned were used, i.e., manufactured, performed, streamed, downloaded, and so on, as well as the royalties that flowed from those uses.³⁴ At the time, ATV owned the publishing rights to 251 Beatles' songs, which Jackson acquired for a mere \$47.5 million after Paul McCartney encouraged him to invest in other musicians' catalogs during their 1983 "Say Say Say" recording

session.³⁵ The royalties that Jackson earned from the purchase allowed him to remain solvent during the 1990s and 2000s, when he was spending money at a staggering rate. In 1995, a cash-strapped Jackson entered a deal with Sony to jointly manage the publishing rights. Sony finally purchased Jackson's share in 2016 for a then incredible \$750 million. The publishing rights in the 251 Beatles songs in the ATV catalog are now worth in excess of \$1B,³⁶ a number that will likely grow rapidly over the next decades.

48.2 Copyright law's racial exclusions

Historically speaking, conflicts over copyright ownership began long before Swift or Jackson.³⁷ "Race records," as 78-rpm phonographs featuring Black artist created blues, jazz, and comedy in the 1920s through the 1950s were called, entrenched a pernicious hierarchy between "Black art" and "white art" that facilitated the theft of Black music at the hands of white-owned record companies. Segregationist genre names, talent cultivation, and marketing practices treated Black art as taboo for mainstream audiences, thereby making it attractive for underground scenes. An intentionally cultivated narrative of disrespectability allowed white people to benefit from astronomical record sales and hipster cultural fetishism, what Eric Lott calls "love and theft,"³⁸ without fairly compensating or crediting Black creators for their compositions or masters. Kevin J. Greene's groundbreaking work has documented in detail how, as a result of the ongoing distinctions between "race" music and "white" music, Black musicians became the "invisible men and women of copyright jurisprudence,"³⁹ who were historically denied "compensation and recognition."⁴⁰ Their second-class intellectual property citizenship was built into the very structures of copyright law, resulting in systemic dispossession.⁴¹ Greene identifies five ways that copyright law worked against Black musicians: 1) the idea-expression dichotomy; 2) the fixation requirement; 3) the originality standard; 4) copyright registration procedures; and 5) lack of moral rights provisions.⁴² The issues that arose from the specific structure of the Copyright Act of 1976 and Euro-American imaginary of authorship were compounded by other aggravating forms of systematic racism such as forced illiteracy and bargaining inequalities, all of which persist today to varying forms and degrees.

The idea-expression dichotomy refers to the legal fact that, per §102(b) of the Copyright Act, *expression* is copyrightable but *ideas* are not. In part due to the collection practices of folklorists, e.g., Alan Lomax, Black musical innovations have consistently been treated as raw material for the taking, i.e., musical ideas outside of the scope of copyright law and not as tangible expressions deserving of copyright protection.⁴³ For Lomax, the mere act of collecting music by pressing record on a tape machine justified credit ranging from arranger to composer on blues sound recordings.⁴⁴ The fixation requirement refers to the legal fact that §101 of the Copyright Act requires creative works to be "fixed in a tangible medium of expression" to be copyrightable. Because Black musicians often built upon familiar aural traditions while being denied access to legal tools and rights, such as literacy and ownership, their artistic works tended *not* to be fixed in any tangible medium of expression. Moreover, because courts have created a high bar for the protection of rhythm, which is central to many Black musical traditions, they have also de facto-privileged European creatorial cultures by centering melody and decentering beats.⁴⁵ Even those Black creators who did fix their work in the tangible medium of the sound recording, as required by the Copyright Act, could not claim copyright protection until the 1970s. They were then held to legal standards, including the Copyright Act's originality requirement, that appeared to be racially neutral but produced inequitable outcomes. Copyrighted works are statutorily required to be "original," a standard that the Supreme Court has interpreted to mean showing "a modicum of creativity."⁴⁶ Yet Black artists have been consistently held to higher

originality standards than their white counterparts, particularly where music is concerned.⁴⁷ American copyright law has, as a result of these three central legal requirements, substantively facilitated the wholesale theft of Black musical performances, partially or completely without affording rights to attribution, compensation, accountability, or integrity.

On top of this, copyright law in the US rewards authors and artists for abiding by a set of precise administrative formalities in order to claim the benefits of their limited monopolies. These formalities, which make copyright registration a difficult process even in the best of circumstances, have historically made it structurally difficult for Black people to benefit fully from copyright protection.⁴⁸ Even now, as Greene shows, administrative formalities create obstacles to copyright ownership for Black artists.⁴⁹ Compounding these issues, US copyright law offers little in the way of moral rights, especially when compared to European nations. Moral rights protect artistic works through dignity oriented concepts such as attribution, integrity, and pater-nity. Moral rights can thus serve as complements and alternatives to property-centric copyright protections, particularly in justifying reparative permission and compensation for music used without them. If the United States had a more robust moral rights regime, musicians who could prove the provenance of their appropriated works could theoretically meaningfully protect their music and make damage claims even in cases in which they did not own the copyrights to the work.

In addition to its disparate impact on Black artists, copyright law's historic exclusion of sound recordings had gendered effects. Greene, for instance, traces the history of how jazz and blues greats like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey were "swindled out of copyrights to compositions and subject to disparate treatment."⁵⁰ As Daphne Brooks' awe-inspiring compendium of Black women's contributions to music criticism demonstrates, despite prevailing narratives about the music industry minimizing their contributions, Black women played an instrumental role in building and refining the musical architectures through which jazz, blues, and rock evolved—as well as, of course, the music itself. Michael Jackson and Prince may have been the first to break MTV's televisual color lines but it was Mamie Smith who managed to "break the sound barrier in the antiblack music industry."⁵¹ I use the term "intellectual labor"⁵² in the remainder of this chapter as Brooks does, in the anticapitalist spirit of Cedric Robinson,⁵³ in order to call attention to moments in which Black women shaped copyright ownership practices, thereby proving that "Black work matters in relation to modern life."⁵⁴ I am interested in where and why they sought to put pressure on the music industry as well as when and how their ownership strategies impacted contemporary artists' ownership strategies. Though I neither exclusively focus on Black women in the history of sound recording masters, as Brooks does with music critics, nor purport to tell an exhaustive history of their struggles in that area, I want to emphasize that their efforts to build protected creative space prompted seismic shifts in copyright law that require further recognition and examination. A genealogical approach to thinking about master recordings illustrates that Swift is not a singularity but a beneficiary of hundreds of years of Black liberation struggle that preceded her.

48.3 Rewriting the struggle over master recordings

By the 1920s, race records had become quite popular but Black artists were struggling to benefit from their popularity. As a result, the music industry quickly became a site for Black entrepreneurial interventions, such as opening record companies and contesting monetization structures, that aimed at addressing this dispossession.⁵⁵ I examine these moves through the stories of Harry Herbert Pace, Juanita Stinnette Chappelle, Sherman Johnson, Dionne Warwick, Sam Cooke, and others, with emphasis on their lasting contributions. Pace, founder of the first Black owned

record company in the US, explained in 1939: “[c]ompanies would not entertain any thought of recording a colored musician or colored voice, I therefore decided to form my own company and make such recordings as I believed would sell.”⁵⁶ His Black Swan Records represented an important early move to secure Black ownership, one that is often lost in the larger-than-life histories of Motown and Stax. Pace chose the path he did partly because his previous business with W. C. Handy, Pace and Handy Sheet Music, inadvertently facilitated discrimination in the music industry by making it easier for white-owned record companies to purchase Black authored musical compositions only to go on to hire white artists to record them.⁵⁷ His efforts were grounded in a mission of racial uplift, a commitment he had learned from his mentor W. E. B. DuBois.⁵⁸ The young company struggled to find a pressing plant to produce the records and, ultimately, Pace was forced to trade his master recordings for printing services.⁵⁹ Yet despite Pace’s heroic efforts to create a space for Black entrepreneurial independence within an oppressively white burgeoning music industry market economy, Black Swan Records went bankrupt, largely because white run record companies had more power and money with which to attract and retain artists.⁶⁰ Unequal bargaining power was and remains a formidable obstacle to musical equity, partly because it stifles fair competition and diverse ownership.⁶¹

In 1921, the same year that Black Swan Records was founded and Bessie Smith broke the sound barrier, Juanita Stinnette Chappelle, an already successful vaudeville performer, became the first Black woman to own a record company, Chappelle and Stinnette Records. She exemplified the category of individuals that Brooks refers to as the “culture makers who often labor right before our very eyes and ears without recognition of the magnitude of their import.”⁶² Having performed on five of the six records that the company produced, Stinnette claimed ownership of her master recordings through the co-ownership of her business. Her revolutionary move highlights the role of Black women in advancing the (intellectual) property rights of musicians as well as the conceptual significance of master recordings, especially in bridging the gaps between the commodification of performance and the reaping of profits. A litany of white women followed Stinnette in owning record companies, including Ursula Greville, Lillian McMurry, Ruth White, and Florence Greenberg.⁶³ The business dealings of two of these women, Chappelle and McMurry, demonstrate the complexity of the negotiations over masters among Black musicians and the manner in which they have shaped contemporary conversations about racialized ownership in the music industry.

McMurry’s record company, Trumpet Records, signed a number of Black blues artists—a choice that flew in the face of Mississippi’s segregationist politics.⁶⁴ Beginning in 1950, her attorneys adopted a standard recording contract for all acts that the company signed. For the purposes of this article, the important part of the standard contract that Trumpet Records used is its expansive intellectual property clause. Copyright historian Antonia Eliason describes how the Trumpet Records contract attempted to claim ownership over musical compositions written *before* the contract went into effect as well as those written after. The sweeping contract read:

As to any original compositions and/or arrangements by Second Party during the term of this contract or any extensions thereof, it is agreed: All musical works written and composed and/or arranged by Second Party shall be and become the property of First Party, its assigns or successors forever, and First Party shall have the right to dispose of same in whatever manner it deem[s] appropriate, including but not limited to securing copyrights thereto.

Though Eliason reads McMurry’s contract as “fair and non-exploitative,”⁶⁵ I view the situation differently. When McMurry tried to claim ownership of the musical compositions that

blues artist Sherman Johnson created before he signed with McMurtry, he sued. In a rare win for a Black musician at the time, the Mississippi Supreme Court held in *Globe Music Corp. v. Johnson* (Miss. 1956) that the vague contract provision should be construed in Johnson's favor because he was the non-contracting party.⁶⁶ This episode is illustrative of the individual battles that musicians, particularly those of means, have had to fight in order to make sometimes only incremental improvements in ownership and royalties. It also highlights how purportedly race neutral contract language can result in expansive takings of property that reinforce inequality across race, gender, and class. Moreover, it is one example of how a well-intentioned, even progressive, white woman contributed to contract norms that hindered Black equity as a long term project. McMurtry's communications with contracted Black musicians often reflected what I interpret as her contextually racialized desire to manage their perceived unruliness and unreliability.⁶⁷ While respectability and reliability were certainly necessary to McMurtry's gig-based business, the "tough love" politics that she seemingly adopted would justifiably raise eyebrows today, especially when contextualized within a labor structure that ensured that she would control such valuable musical assets.

Fighting individual battles, though sometimes successful, did not fundamentally change the structural causes of dispossession; rather it reinforced counterproductive incentive structures that persist today. The inimitable Dionne Warwick's battle to own her masters highlights how structural critiques of the music industry emerged from individual ownership struggles, here through the production of language to speak about slavery and exploitation. Warwick, whose work was once part of Florence Greenberg's catalog at Scepter Records, finally gained control of her masters when the record company was acquired by Springboard International and then Gusto Records in the mid-1970s. Her story began in 1962, however, when she released her first solo single with Scepter Records. Burt Bacharach and Hal David, who would later become instrumental in recovering the masters, produced the hit.⁶⁸ Then, in 1970, after a hugely successful run, she became president of her own record label, Sondag Records, with Scepter Records serving as the distributor.⁶⁹ Soon after, Warwick signed a \$5 million contract, one of the biggest for a female artist up to that time, with Warner Brothers.⁷⁰ By 1975, Bacharach and David, frustrated with Scepter Records' questionable financial practices, sued for an accurate accounting of royalties on the many hits they collaborated on with Warwick. The lawsuit ended in Bacharach and David being awarded over \$400,000 and Warwick's entire catalog going to their record company, Blue Jac, with Scepter serving as distributor.⁷¹ When Bacharach and David subsequently had their own falling out, Warwick sued. The trio settled out of court, with Warwick receiving the rights to all of her masters produced by Bacharach and David.⁷² Though relatively poorly documented, this victory against, in Warwick's words, "the slave contracts"⁷³ offered by a woman for whom she nonetheless felt familial attachment,⁷⁴ created an early structural model and ideological justification for Black artists to regain control over their master recordings.

Notably, Warwick's critique of slavery extended beyond the music industry, into films. Through her character, Cassy, in the film *Slaves* (1969), Warwick advanced a substantive critique of real and metaphorical master/slave relations. The film received negative reviews in the US but it fared well at the Cannes Film Festival; Warwick herself considered it important social commentary.⁷⁵ One scholar goes so far as to contend that, despite being situated at the fraught intersections of Blaxploitation, sexploitation, and Black Power, the film made a groundbreaking critique of slavery from a then rarely acknowledged vantage point:

Slaves became one of the first in a cycle of revisionist movies about slavery grandly claiming to offer a more critical and realistic portrait of the "peculiar institution than that long perpetuated in plantation romances like *Gone With the Wind*."⁷⁶

Warwick's willingness to draw on the language and history of slavery aided in shifting the "rhetorical culture"⁷⁷ around histories and presents of the exploitation of Black labor, in a form Brooks might understand as "game-changing art that stands as an affirmation of our past as well as the unrecorded future of sound."⁷⁸ In essence, Warwick aided in producing a vocabulary for speaking about musical racial capitalism. Years later, Prince repurposed this refusal to cede the landscape of slavery and Blaxploitation meets Black Power narrative, transforming it into a public critique of Warner Brothers' intellectual property policies.⁷⁹

The Kingsmen, who performed the stratospherically popular 1964 version of "Louie, Louie," also sued Gusto Records to recover their masters—and 30 years of back royalties that were never paid to them in violation of their original contract. While they accomplished a difficult feat in securing ownership and royalties, Richard Berry, the Black R&B artist who wrote the underlying musical composition, was not so lucky, as had sold the rights to Flip Records in 1957 for a mere \$750 to finance his wedding. Eventually Berry, who was not able to benefit from the Kingsmen's impressive success, was able to recover partial ownership of his musical composition with the help of the Artists Rights Enforcement Corporation in 1986,⁸⁰ no doubt because of the triumphs of those who came before him. Chuck Rubin then helped him sell rights to the song to Windswept Pacific in 1992, for an amount that he claims is only exceeded by "Happy Birthday," which sold for \$25 million. Berry received his first long overdue royalty check for \$2 million in 1992,⁸¹ five years before he passed away from heart failure.

By the 1950s and 1960s, Motown was walking a well-trodden path with respect to Black entrepreneurialism in the music industry and its mere existence enticed Black musicians to sign. Packaging soul, a distinctly Black musical genre built upon the foundations of rhythm and blues and gospel, as central to the civil rights struggle allowed Motown, as well as Black-centric Stax, to sell "Black" music to wider audiences, while also creating the perception that Black musicians were being treated fairly. Yet while Black-centric record companies flourished from the 1960s on, they did not always embrace racial uplift in the way that Pace did. For instance, Barry Gordy's Motown was famously ungenerous where sound recordings masters were concerned. Nonetheless, the popularization of soul aided artists like Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, and Stevie Wonder in negotiating the return of their masters. Charles, for instance, purportedly the earliest highly successful Black musician to own his sound recording masters, left Atlantic Records in the early 1960s to join ABC-Paramount on the condition that they would be returned to him. In doing so, he became one of the first contemporary Black artists to gain rights to his masters. He both followed in Stinnette's footsteps and forged a path for Warwick by gaining copyright ownership and founding two of his own record companies, Tangerine and CrossOver.⁸²

Cooke, another Black musician who skillfully managed the business side of his career, started his own independent record company, SAR Records in 1959, and later his own publishing company, Kags Music, while also successfully renegotiating his recording contract with RCA, the major label he was signed to as a solo artist. With the help of his "money guy," Allen Klein, he was able to engineer an unprecedented contract for the return of his masters. In an attempt to recoup the over \$200,000 in royalties that RCA owed Cooke, Klein had pushed for ownership rights in five years. When RCA agreed, but after 30 years instead of five years, Klein and Cooke were stunned and pleased. Cooke's masters were ultimately returned, though posthumously. Because Klein had become Cooke's manager and Cooke died intestate, the sound recordings and musical compositions reverted to him. While Cooke was not able to benefit from this deal personally and his story is somewhat of a musical tragedy, his victories appear to have made it easier for those who came after him to negotiate for their masters. Wonder, for instance, was able to regain his sound recording masters from Motown early in his career, in 1971.⁸³ Also following Cooke's lead, Curtis Mayfield founded Curtom Records in 1968.⁸⁴ Though the now defunct

record label was a subsidiary of Warner Brothers, it remains historically important in the struggles for Black liberation and Black ownership. Similarly, after recording with Cincinnati-based King Records for many years, James Brown founded his own record companies, beginning with Try Me Records in 1963, which allowed him to own at least some of his masters.⁸⁵ George Clinton's Uncle Jam Records was born in 1980, though Clinton joined Capitol Records in 1982 and Prince's Paisley Park record company in 1986. These examples are emblematic of the tremendous energy it took to even begin to reshape a music industry that Arewa demonstrates was built on a foundation of racialized norms of "unfair use."⁸⁶

Prince's intellectual property battles in the 1990s, which I alluded to early, also made meaningful contributions to the history of Black ownership, by articulating new imaginaries of Black capitalism and inspiring artists such as Larry Graham, Chaka Khan, Nas, and Janelle Monae to attempt to negotiate for ownership of their masters. Prince's superstardom provided him with visibility and leverage that many other musicians lacked, which he mobilized by writing "SLAVE" on his face and changing his name to the Love Symbol during years of public conflict with Warner Brothers.⁸⁷ In a parallel move, Larry Graham, bassist for Sly and the Family Stone and close collaborator of Prince, chose to rerecord a number of his hit songs because he could not recover his rights to the masters.⁸⁸ Taking Prince's protest a step further, in the style of Warwick, Pharrell Williams recently revived the description of himself as a musical "slave" by associating it with the term "master,"⁸⁹ as in sound recording masters. Unlike in eras past, Sony was quick to agree to revise its contracts in response to the association of its business with the word "slave," by eliminating the word "master" from them. Pharrell also negotiated a contract with Columbia Records, a subsidiary of Sony, in which he retained ownership of his intellectual property and founded a non-profit organization, Black Ambition, that supports Black creators in retaining their rights.⁹⁰ Kanye West, now a deeply disquieting figure at best, has made similar critiques, drawing on the language of "modern day slave ships."⁹¹ These critiques are notable given the rapper's public conflicts with Swift.

One industry insider recently noted: "Publishing assets are currently running at multiples well over 12, with master rights slightly lower but increasing in value ... In five to 10 years, it might be 20x—the value continues to rise."⁹² The popular realization that controlling intellectual property rights in music is lucrative has created more space for musicians to talk about such topics in public, as well as demand for the value of the assets to rise. Though Prince's intellectual property management tactics, including changing his name to the Love Symbol, were treated as strange, even unhinged, at the time he was engaged in them, posthumously they have become part of an arsenal of known strategies for established and emerging creators to protect their artistic works. Interestingly, some musicians appear to be taking the opposite approach to the ones discussed here, with Bob Dylan, Stevie Nicks, and even Tina Turner selling their masters for millions of dollars. In a deal completed in December 2020, Dylan sold 100 percent of the rights to 600 of his songs for an estimated \$300 million.⁹³ Turner secured \$50 million for her catalog, which included over ten albums. The latter suggests that masters can both help musicians to earn royalties and cash in on valuable assets. In an analysis of the rush to sell off masters, *Rolling Stone* identified COVID restrictions, tax benefits, personal benefits, and securing legacies as the top reasons that artists are now selling.⁹⁴ Nonetheless, for the many deceased Black musicians who cannot now benefit from such sales, this epitomizes the phrase "too little too late."

These historical examples showcase the *longue durée* of musical rights evolution, illuminating how narratives of owning sound recording masters have evolved through the cumulative effects of individual struggles and micro interventions. Matthew Morrison argues in his groundbreaking work on "Blacksound," which describes the genealogical histories through which white people seamlessly appropriated Black sonic cultures,⁹⁵ that intellectual property law in

the music industry emerged around a set of racial needs articulated by industrial capitalists. His “race based epistemology” calls attention to how “popular entertainment, culture, and identity have been shaped by the sonic and embodied legacy of blackface minstrelsy in and beyond the United States.”⁹⁶ Morrison contends that “(intellectual) property, performance, structural inequities, and the racialization of identity ... are interconnected in the making and economy of popular music.”⁹⁷ I want to emphasize that, insofar as Black musicians have been able to shift the structures that have led to their copyright dispossession, they have been able to do so over time in incremental but persistent moves. In this sense, even Taylor Swift is part of the larger history of racial exploitation bound up in the ownership histories of sound recording masters not of her own making. In the final section, I turn to the specifics of this historical embeddedness.

48.4 Master ownership as tactical (white) postfeminism

The narrative that Taylor Swift is a larger-than-life talent who prevailed over her sexually harassing, music-stealing bully of an employer is undoubtedly compelling. Yet, it is also frequently communicated in a way that is deeply white, postfeminist, and ahistoric. I consider three ways that Swift’s invisible intersectional subject position, i.e., her whiteness, middle classness, and femininity, contribute to her image as a singularity, is divorced from the racial struggles that preceded her. First, Swift’s white femininity gives her easier access to narratives of victimhood than her Black counterparts, thus allowing her to center her experiences of sexual harassment in ways that Black women are culturally prohibited from doing. Second, Swift’s race, class, and gender makes her claims to (intellectual) property ownership appear natural and expected in a nation built on the (intellectual) propertization of people of color, as opposed to exceptional and extraordinary. Finally, Swift’s white femininity allows her to produce the historical fiction that she is a one-of-a-kind trailblazer with an extraordinary capacity for resilience, pushing those radical Black musicians who came before her further to the margins. In this context, my historicization of Black artists and entrepreneurs who opened record companies and owned sound recording masters, albeit limited, is a methodological corrective to this historical amnesia that places Swift outside the long line of Black “bodies-in-dissent”⁹⁸ whose interventions preceded her. More such correctives are needed.

First, from her subject position as a white woman who started her career young, with the privileges of wealth, Swift can easily mobilize narratives of victimhood as well as calls for retribution in her allegations of record industry wrongdoing. Unlike many of her Black peers who are objects of victim-blaming and punitive remedies, she has access to ingrained national myths about the need to protect white women from predatory behavior.⁹⁹ Swift’s self-styling has made these claims appear more natural, even expected. For instance, in anticipation of her pop music debut at the 2009 Video Music Awards, Swift transformed herself into a “virtuous fairy princess,”¹⁰⁰ complete with a Cinderella-style carriage. In a now infamous moment, after a then 19-year-old Swift was awarded Best Video for a Female Awarded, West rushed the stage and shouted: “Yo, Taylor, I’m really happy for you, I’mma let you finish, but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time! One of the best videos of all time!”¹⁰¹ This incident laid the groundwork for an ongoing cultural conversation about Swift as the quintessential innocent white woman victim—and demonstrated that Twitter would be an important site for the adjudication of such topics, especially where racial justice and social movements are concerned.¹⁰² The incident ended with Swift backstage in tears, alongside a distraught Beyoncé. When Beyoncé later won Video of the Year at the end of the ceremony, she ceded her speech time to Swift, ostensibly at the urging of one of the show’s producers.¹⁰³ One interpretation of this turn is that Beyoncé paid the price for West’s outburst at a white woman while Swift coopted her limelight.

Even then President Barack Obama called West a “jackass,” seemingly siding with Swift—or at least against West. Given West’s recent behavior, this epithet now reads as measured. Twitter was harsher, calling for punishments that reeked of carceral feminism and racial discipline.¹⁰⁴

Swift’s victimhood narrative has persisted, despite a number of racially divisive incidents or perhaps *because* of them. She consistently embodies the flawed yet resilient postfeminist (white) woman, a figure that “recycles damage into more resources.”¹⁰⁵ For instance, Swift clashed with Nicki Minaj on Twitter after Minaj was snubbed for a Video of the Year nomination for “Anaconda” at the VMAs. Over the course of a day, Minaj tweeted about racism in the music industry, eventually noting that “‘other’ girls” with “very slim bodies” were more frequently celebrated for their musical contributions.¹⁰⁶ Swift, who received a nomination for “Bad Blood,” responded defensively to Minaj’s video while Minaj denied that she had subtweeted Swift. In this way, Swift “effectively [positioned] herself as the innocent victim who [deserved] to be pitied and Minaj as the ‘angry black woman.’”¹⁰⁷ The Twitter War escalated for 48 hours, with Minaj critiquing “White media and their tactics” and Bruno Mars jumping in, before Swift apologized and Minaj accepted, but not before Black Twitter had its say.¹⁰⁸

Swift has also been memed as the white nationalist character “Taydolf Swiftler,” an “Aryan Goddess.” While Swift is not responsible for these memes, she has notably taken years to denounce them, thus amplifying perceptions that she seeks to benefit from her whiteness in a decidedly white nationalist moment.¹⁰⁹ That she continues to be able to position herself as the bullied musician whose intentions were misread and apology was sincere is partly a function of the body she inhabits. *Teen Vogue*, a favorite of the progressive left, observed that: “[m]isunderstandings happen, especially when communication doesn’t play out face to face. How many times have you wrongly interpreted a text, or read the grin emoji as a straight up grimace?” Even as the essay critiqued Swift’s white femininity, it concluded

[t]oday, Taylor issued an apology to Nicki, proving...that nobody is perfect, not even Taylor Swift. By admitting that she’s wrong, Taylor has gracefully shown that while the media has turned this back-and-forth into a catfight, this isn’t a girl feud. She’s learning from this, and we can too.¹¹⁰

I highlight these quotes not to argue against apologies or grace but rather to point out that the embrace of Swift’s apologia happened quickly and decisively, in a way that people of color struggle to accomplish with similar ease. Black women, Black queer people, and Black trans people, in particular, are all too often treated as though they are objects of danger and derision, not subjects of victimhood. Minaj, like Beyoncé, was decentered and managed in the service of white femininity, with Swift’s apology taking center stage.

Second, Swift’s claims to (intellectual) property ownership, which are intertwined with her neoliberal white feminism, are treated as natural and normal, contra the history of Black (intellectual) property ownership. Harris observes in the canonical “Whiteness as Property” that whiteness itself is a valuable commodity, a “status property”¹¹¹ through which claims to real property are made and upheld. Deidré Keller and I have extended that argument to *intellectual* property, writing:

whiteness brings with it a set of privileges and presumptions in the context of intellectual property law: whites have historically constructed information regimes in ways [that] devalue the knowledge and practices of non-whites; whites have historically held the power and authority to determine the legal structures which govern intellectual property rights; whites have historically crafted legal doctrines which avoid

the protection of Western understandings of creativity; and whites largely continue to manage domestic and international intellectual property rights regimes.¹¹²

Against this cultural backdrop, Swift's claims are easily amplified in public cultural contexts and afforded an implied veracity that those of her Black peers are not. Swift wrote on Twitter in 2019: "Now Scooter has stripped me of my life's work, that I wasn't given an opportunity to buy. Essentially, my musical legacy is about to lie in the hands of someone who tried to dismantle it."¹¹³ *Bloomberg Businessweek* ran a cover and article amplifying Swift's claims by proclaiming that "Taylor Swift Is the Music Industry." *Inc.* seized on all too often racialized themes of justice, property, and labor that "Swift's situation doesn't seem fair. They're her songs. Her performances. Her blood, her sweat, her tears."¹¹⁴ Paul Théberge writes that "Swift is regarded as ... an emblematic figure whose very success validates the potential of old-industry structures to both challenge and adapt to the demands of a new economic environment."¹¹⁵ The repeated associations of Swift with narratives of injustice and exceptionalism belie those that frequently surrounded Black musicians creating blues, jazz, and rock. As Josh Kun puts it:

The history of enslavement has always haunted the music industry and always structured it ... If you go back to the first Black artists to ever make a commercial musical recording in the [1890s]—George W. Johnson, was a former slave who began his life not owning his own body, being owned by a master, then [went on] to record a master that he did not own. This also gets at the long-standing belief and conviction of so many Black artists ... that they have been treated like slaves by the masters who they signed contracts with. That has been true since the early 1900s, and it is certainly true now.¹¹⁶

This is partially due to tropes that place Black people outside of the categories of humanness, creativity, and ownership in a manner that makes it per se difficult to access copyright law.¹¹⁷

West's ongoing engagements with Swift echo these critiques of Black exclusion/white inclusion. Her tense relationship with West became a topic for tabloid and Twitter fodder again in 2016 when Kim Kardashian leaked tapes of him having a conversation with Swift in which she seemingly approved of the lyrics to the song "Famous," including the line "I made that bitch famous," purportedly about the 2009 VMAs. Swift had previously claimed that West had not sought her approval for the casually misogynistic line—but the recordings that Kardashian released suggested otherwise.¹¹⁸ I engage West here while also acknowledging that he has become a widely hated public figure, for good reason given his defense of Donald Trump, troubling statements about the Thirteenth Amendment, post-divorce possessiveness toward Kim Kardashian, and, most recently, anti-Semitic baiting across platforms. I want to examine his track "Famous" and its accompanying music video because they remain incisive commentaries on the race, gender, and class dynamics at play in the celebrity industrial complex, especially where Black brilliance is concerned, despite the often destructive behavior of their creator. West's line "I made that bitch famous" highlights how disparate experiences of race, class, and gender can affect a celebrity's rise to stardom and ability to take up public space with the kind of resilience that Swift has benefited from by contrasting his own experiences with those who are only "hood famous." The music video, in its portrayal of West as at the center of an homage to Vincent Desiderio's *Sleep*—which is in turn an homage to Jackson Pollack's *Mural*—conspicuously centers a brilliant Black man and his perspective of fame in a long line of white artists, via a critiques reminiscent of the ones Jean-Michel Basquiat frequently advanced.¹¹⁹ Through ethically ambiguous use of deepfake images of naked people, including Donald Trump, Bill

Cosby, and Taylor Swift, the music video invokes a disturbing (im)politics of consent while also interrogating culturally accepted definitions of power, celebrity, and creatorship.¹²⁰ West, a figure who would be erased from most representations in “high” culture because of his Blackness—perhaps even crowded out by Teflon celebrities such as Swift—tells a visual and lyrical story about fame that centers Black men as authors and geniuses. This is, in effect, both a critique of the naturalization of whiteness as intellectual property and a demonstration of West’s own authorial prowess. West emphasizes that he, as a Black man, will never benefit from the same presumptions about creatorial genius that white people, including Swift, are repeatedly offered. Neither will those that look like him.

Finally, Swift’s white femininity, grounded in barely teen-turned-adult celebrity, allows her to position herself as an ahistoric figure, a purported Great Woman of History who authored the resistive history of masters.¹²¹ Though Swift may not have intentionally sought to take sole credit for her victories against those who own her sound recordings, her frequent framing of her situation without reference to those who came before her and the journalistic tendency to center her narrative over the experiences of Black artists demonstrate how her white femininity enables access to a racialized form of authorial credit that is structurally denied to similarly situated Black musicians. LeiLani Nishime and I have previously written about how affording white figures the ability to transcend time and history, operating as larger-than-life creators, while containing people of color within specific moments of time, is a postfeminist representational tactic of containment. We observe of Karl Lagerfeld’s mining of Chinese fashion past and present for inspiration in the present that it “enacts unequal relations of exchange and consumption by remaking Chinese ‘costumes’ into marketable ‘fashions.’”¹²² His extraction of raw materials without collaboration or consent “affirms the power and superiority of white womanhood and operates as a sign of feminist empowerment.”¹²³ In Swift’s case, the masters controversy becomes a signifier of her “maturity” as a woman who pushes back against “unfair” treatment by her oppressors, without reference to the countless Black artists who were ignored or derided in similarly weighty struggles. The world, she seems to forget, is not fair.

Swift’s political awakening, which began roughly in late 2019, has received mixed reviews, with some critiquing her performative embrace of neoliberal equality and her slowness in distancing herself from white supremacy.¹²⁴ In a September 2019 *Rolling Stone* interview, Swift declared that there’s “literally nothing worse than white supremacy”¹²⁵ and finally condemned the “Taydolf Swiffler” meme. Brian Hiatt, who interviewed her, later noted: “[y]ou’ve been masterminding your business since you were a teenager,”¹²⁶ thereby reinforcing the familiar narrative of her as all-knowing. Swift continued to condemn white supremacy, calling for racial justice after George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery were killed by police and denouncing Donald Trump’s openly racist screeds. She also advocated for removing Confederate monuments in the South and making Juneteenth a national holiday. Her support for racial justice was certainly appropriate, even necessary—but it collapsed into largely uncritical journalistic praise for (white) postfemininity. The archive that I considered overwhelmingly conveyed the message that Swift is now an antiracist shero, destined for greatness. Kornhaber ends his essay by asking “Was Swift prescient about the ties she’d eventually have to cut?” He continues: “The *folklore* song ‘Cardigan’ already answered that question with this refrain: I knew everything when I was young. She really did.”¹²⁷ In one fell swoop, Kornhaber dismisses Swift’s racial missteps by romanticizing the art of her teen years while also failing to name the longstanding struggles in which she is implicated in her adult years. He places her out of time by flating her age and existence, situating her as an always already all-knowing being. Swift is not, I would argue, prescient. She is a savvy businesswoman—and perhaps also an excellent student of history—with the ability to deploy the ownership strategies that worked for those came before, while centering

her own empowered victimhood. She deserves credit for her success. But she is not a one and only, now or historically, who deserves to be set apart from those who came before.

Despite Swift's claims about her commitment to racial justice, with four notable exceptions, almost none of the set of approximately 400 articles and interviews I read about her masters battles mentioned the musicians who came before her. Those that did only offered a sentence or two about racial injustice.¹²⁸ An essay in Rolling Stone's special issue on the Future of Music covered racial exploitation in music contracts, offering examples of Chicano musicians who used their knowledge of the industry to secure a fair(er) deal alongside a precis of Swift's negotiations.¹²⁹ An article in *The New York Times* offered an extensive historical look at racial injustice in the music industry, naming Prince, Janet Jackson, and Jay-Z as Black artists who fought for their masters.¹³⁰ A thinkpiece in *bitchmedia*, that cited Greene, highlighted the need for race and gender analyses of copyright law.¹³¹ Finally, an editorial in the *Daily Free Press*, the student newspaper at Boston University, pointed to the need to discuss the histories of Black musical dispossession alongside Swift's moves.¹³² These pieces are outliers, written by journalists invested in race, with disproportionate coverage of white artists' contractual negotiations remaining the norm. In a conversation on Twitter in which a naysayer called out Nicki Minaj for speaking about the impacts of her music, she called attention to the silencing of Black women in conversations about ownership and circulation. She exclaimed, referring to Swift's masters struggle: "Taylor Swift can speak but I can't?"¹³³ Megan Thee Stallion faced similar pushback, unlike Swift.¹³⁴ I liken the outcomes of Swift's engagements with race to the forms of marginalization and erasure that Eric Smialiak argues emerge through her advocacy for LGBTQ+ communities. He contends that she embraces a "rainbow capitalism" through which she tentatively and performatively engages in political activism. Using examples drawn from media headlines and cultural satire, Smialiak notes that "[t]he idea that Swift has hijacked the struggle for LGBTQ rights recurs repeatedly through claims that 'You Need to Calm Down' equates her own struggles with those of systemically marginalised demographics."¹³⁵

Swift "invites criticism for arriving late."¹³⁶ And she indeed "arrives late," to the conversation about master recordings. For instance, on the one hand, her move to congratulate Anita Baker for regaining her masters brings much-needed attention to the issue and its intersections with race.¹³⁷ On the other hand, it is a small gesture, lacking in the gravitas that Swift could potentially bring to the conversation. Red Chidgey writes of "celebrity feminism" as a specific brand of feminist intervention that emphasizes neoliberal success over political investment. Depoliticizing feminism in this way creates "an entrepreneurial subject, making free, strategic choices based on self-interest."¹³⁸ This postfeminist framing may end in individual victories but it frequently does so at the expense of collective struggle. Swift's ability to choose to deliberately embrace the political is a privilege of her whiteness.¹³⁹ This intentionality, much like ahistoricity, is rooted in a legally enshrined, racialized belief that *white women* possess a developed interiority deserving of privacy, while people of color, particularly Black women, do not. Eden Osucha writes of the circulation of racist trademarks contra the emergence of privacy law, showing how the former cruelly objectified Black women:

whites' representative interiority and privacy constituted a countersign to the eminently public bodies installed in the image archives of scientific and state surveillance and reproduced in mass culture via popular entertainment and the racially denigrating visual consumption of African Americans in the commodity marketplace.¹⁴⁰

Though none of the three issues that I have raised in this section refute Swift's talent, popularity, or success, they highlight important questions about the ethical obligations that come with

occupying a white and feminine body with extraordinary power and visibility, especially vis-à-vis racial struggle. I maintain that Swift could and should do more.

48.5 Seeing *Red* (Taylor's Version)

When she announced that she would be rerecording her early musical catalog in order to fight music industry misogyny and own her masters, Taylor Swift's fans rallied around her.¹⁴¹ I have argued here that the ongoing success of Swift's strategy is attributable in large part to the sound/writing binary built into copyright law, the path for musician ownership of master recordings and musical compositions that Black artists—particularly Black women—have trailblazed, and her own positionality as a white woman capable of transforming her racial missteps. Swift is a world-class popular music star with an unshakeable fan base. She is also a white woman with a particular ability to access the nuance and complexity of narratives of white innocence and white femininity in America. An intersectional analysis of Swift's white femininity coupled with a historical genealogy of the ownership victories of the Black musicians that came before her offers a complex look of how she moves in an ecosystem created by those who were undoubtedly more marginalized than her with comparative ease.

Swift tweeted on November 12, 2021:

It never would've been possible to go back & remake my previous work, uncovering lost art & forgotten gems along the way if you [the fans] hadn't emboldened me. *Red* is about to be mine again, but it has always been ours. Now we begin again.

Couched in the language of postfeminist ownership, i.e., “[r]ed is about to be mine again,” and the tactical imagining of copyright to court fans, i.e., “it has always been ours,” Swift at times sidesteps the “lost art” of Black capitalism and the “forgotten gems” of Black intellectual labor. She is a paragon of resilient rebirth, who emerges stronger after misogynist attacks. Not to be outdone as reigning Queen of Twitter, Ms. Dionne Warwick herself tweeted about Jake Gyllenhaal, “[i]f that young man has Taylor's scarf, he should return it.” Her rationale: “It does not belong to you.” This one-liner is perhaps the most profound statement that Warwick could have made in this situation.

Notes

- 1 My appreciation to Samantha Pinto, Jennifer Nash, Kembrew McLeod, Margaret Chon, Phillip Samuels, Lisa Corrigan, and David Hesmondhalgh for their collaboration, feedback, and interlocution. They have made this essay sharper. And a special thank you to Kevin J. Greene, who I have had the great honor of learning from and with on these topics.
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- 3 Hugh McIntyre, “Taylor Swift's Fans Have Always Loved Her, But Their Support of Her New No. 1 Album Feels Special,” *Forbes*, April 29, 2021, www.forbes.com/sites/hughmcintyre/2021/04/29/taylor-swifts-fans-have-always-loved-her-but-their-support-of-her-new-no-1-album-feels-special/.
- 4 See e.g., Gina Arnold, “I Don't Give a Damn About Your Bad Reputation: Taylor Swift, Beyonce Knowles, and Performance,” *Contemporary Music Review* 40.1 (2021): 27–40.
- 5 Katie Goh, “‘I Made My Peace.’ Fans Divided Over Taylor Swift's Rerecording Project,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2021, www.theguardian.com/music/2021/apr/15/i-made-my-peace-fans-divided-over-taylor-swifts-re-recording-project.
- 6 Sarah J. Jackson, “Introduction: Celebrity and Popular Feminist Visibility,” *Women's Studies in Communication* 43.4 (2020): 329–32.

- 7 Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).
- 8 Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (1993): 1707–91.
- 9 Anjali Vats and Deidre Keller, "Critical Race IP," *Cardozo Arts and Entertainment Law Journal* 36.3 (2018).
- 10 See e.g., Sonia K. Katyal, "Trademark Intersectionality," *UCLA L. Rev.* 57 (2009): 1601–699.
- 11 Devon W. Carbado, "Colorblind Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38.4 (2013), 817.
- 12 These films illustrate that except in moments of white saviorism that result in Black prosperity, structural racism made it difficult for Black musicians to flourish. Greene writes about the long history of Black dispossession by centering the need for copyright reparations. K. J. Greene, "'Copynorms,' Black Cultural Production, and the Debate Over African-American Reparations," *Cardozo Arts and Entertainment Law Journal* 25.3 (2008): 1179–227.
- 13 See e.g., Rebecca Tushnet, "My Fair Ladies: Sex, Gender, and Fair Use in Copyright Symposium: The Third Annual IP/Gender: The Unmapped Connections Symposium," *American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law* 15 (2007–2006): 273–304; Ann Bartow, "Fair Use and the Fairer Sex: Gender, Feminism, and Copyright Law," *American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law* 14 (2006): 551–84.
- 14 Keith Aoki, "Space Invaders: Critical Geography, the Third World in International Law and Critical Race Theory," *Vill. L. Rev.* 45 (2000): 913–58; Kevin J. Greene, "Intellectual Property at the Intersection of Race and Gender: Lady Sings the Blues," *American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law* 16.3 (2008): 365–85; Olufunmilayo B. Arewa, "Blues Lives: Promise and Perils of Musical Copyright," *Cardozo Arts & Ent. LJ* 27 (2009): 573–619.
- 15 This idea of relationality draws on Natalia Molina's work to consider how white feminism can result in the erasure of Black creatorship. Natalia Molina, "Understanding Race as a Relational Concept," *Modern American History* 1.1 (March 2018): 101–5. Though Molina seeks to think about relationality *between* groups of people of color, I return to an intersectional focus on relationality as between white women and people of color. The term "matrices of domination" draws on the scholarship of Patricia Hill Collins.
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- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Julietta Hua, "'Gucci Geishas' and Post-Feminism," *Women's Studies in Communication* 32.1 (2009): 63.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Ralina L. Joseph, "'Tyra Banks Is Fat': Reading (Post-)Racism and (Post-)Feminism in the New Millennium," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26.3 (August 2009): 237–54.
- 26 Robin James, *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015).
- 27 Anne Schwan, "Postfeminism Meets the Women in Prison Genre: Privilege and Spectatorship in Orange Is the New Black," *Television & New Media* 17.6 (September 1, 2016): 475.
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- 29 "Taylor Swift's Master Tapes Sold by Scooter Braun to Investment Fund," *BBC News*, November 17, 2020, www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-54969396.
- 30 Elizabeth Blair, "Sony Buys Michael Jackson's Stake in Lucrative Music Catalog," March 15, 2016, www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/03/15/470537451/sony-buys-michael-jacksons-stake-in-lucrative-music-catalog.
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- inlabelgroup.com/news/taylor-swifts-partner-over-decade-we-were-shocked-see-her-tumblr-statements-yesterday-based.
- 32 *BBC News*, *supra* note 29.
- 33 We address both here, though acknowledge their often complex and divergent histories as well.
- 34 Owners of masters control royalties associated with the use of a particular sound recording.
- 35 McCartney later called Jackson's decision "dodgy." It reportedly ruined their friendship and collaboration. Colin Bertram, "How Michael Jackson Bought the Publishing Rights to the Beatles' Song Catalog at the Advice of Paul McCartney," *Biography*, September 8, 2020, www.biography.com/news/michael-jackson-paul-mccartney-beatles-music-catalog.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 For a labor perspective on this conversation, see Matt Stahl, *Unfree Masters: Popular Music and the Politics of Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
- 38 Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- 39 Kevin J. Greene, "Copyright, Culture & Black Music: A Legacy of Unequal Protection," *Hastings Communications and Entertainment Law Journal* 21.2 (1999): 339–92.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 For a discussion of the long history of race and intellectual property citizenship, see Anjali Vats, *The Color of Creatorship: Race, Intellectual Property and the Making of Americans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2020).
- 42 Greene, *supra* note 14.
- 43 Arewa, *supra* note 14. Arewa observes that "the tendency to see blues music as a primitive form of collective folk production reflected widespread stereotypes about African Americans and was part of a conceptual framework of later borrowers that facilitated the free borrowing of such music, often without attribution, let alone compensation. Later borrowers were, however, not the only ones to profit from early blues artists. Both folklorists and record industry participants claimed copyrights in the music they "discovered." *Ibid.* at 582.
- 44 For a comprehensive list of credits, see AllMusic, "Alan Lomax: Credits," AllMusic.com, www.allmusic.com/artist/alan-lomax-mn0000607804/biography. While many scholars stop short of criticizing Lomax, Gia Velasquez points out some of the moral and authorship issues associated with his recordings. Gia Velasquez, "No Credit Where Credit Is Due: Exploitation in Copyright," *Journal of the Patent and Trademark Office Society* 99, no. 4 (2018 2017): 693–707. Though Lomax's archival work is notable, a CRTIP suggests the need to trouble his composer credits, especially in light of lack of named Black authorship on many of the tracks he recorded. David Hesmondhalgh raises similar questions in the context of Moby's *Play*. He writes:
- "it is worth asking how Lomax came to be regarded as entitled to any payment at all in respect of the compositions. As has been shown, his role in relation to the sampled material was that he recorded it: he had no role in composing it. If the performers composed the material they performed, then they owned the copyright in it outright, not jointly with Lomax." David Hesmondhalgh, "Digital Sampling and Cultural Inequality," *Social & Legal Studies* 15.1 (March 1, 2006): 68.
- 45 Kembrew McLeod and Peter DiCola, *Creative License: The Law and Culture of Digital Sampling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). For a detailed look at the case law around rhythm, see Carl Eppler, "These Are the Breaks: Applying the *Newton* Test in a Context to Provide Protection for Rhythmic Material in Musical Works," *University of Memphis Law Review* 42 (Winter 2011). For more examples of the racial harms of fixation, see Alpana Roy, "Copyright: A Colonial Doctrine in a Postcolonial Age," *Copyright Reporter* 26.4 (December 2008): 115–16.
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- 47 Elizabeth L. Rosenblatt, "Copyright's One-Way Racial Appropriation Ratchet," *UC Davis Law Review* 53.2 (2020): 608.
- 48 See e.g., Greene, Kevin J., "Copyright Formalities as the Bane of African-American Artists from Blues to Hip-Hop," High Tech Law Institute, Santa Clara University (2020), https://digitalcommons.law.scu.edu/htli_general/1.
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 Greene, *supra* note 12 at 381.

- 51 Daphne Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 3.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1.1 (2015): 76.
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- 56 Jitu K. Weusi, "The Rise and Fall of Black Swan Records," *The Syncopated Times*, 1996, <https://syncopatedtimes.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-black-swan-records/>.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Nellie Gilles and Mycah Hazel, "Radio Diaries: Harry Pace and the Rise and Fall of Black Swan Records," *All Things Considered*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/30/1011901555/radio-diaries-harry-pace-and-the-rise-and-fall-of-black-swan-records>.
- 59 Stuart Lucas Tully, "Buying In and Selling Out: African American Ownership of Record Labels in the Twentieth Century," *LSU Doctoral Dissertations, Graduate School*, 2016, https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4245&context=gradschool_dissertations
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 David Suisman, "Black Swan Rising," *Humanities* 31.6 (November/December 2010).
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- 63 April Tucker, "Timeline of Women in Early Sound Recording History (1895-1959)," *April Tucker*, February 15, 2019, <https://apriltucker.com/timeline-women-1930/>.
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- 65 Antonia Eliason, "Lillian McMurry and the Blues Contracts of Trumpet Records," *Mississippi Law Journal* 87.3 (2018): 279-338.
- 66 *Globe Music Corp. v. Johnson*, 84 So. 2d 509 (Miss. 1956).
- 67 Eliason, *supra* note 65, 302-3.
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- 69 Fred Kirby, "Miss Warwick Forms Label," *Billboard*, July 18, 1970, 14.
- 70 Tatum Jenkins, "The Vault of Soul: Dionne Warwick," *WERS 88.9 FM*, June 11, 2021, www.wers.org/the-vault-of-soul-dionne-warwick/.
- 71 Is Horowitz, "Scepter Warwick Tapes Awarded," *Billboard*, December 18, 1976, 14.
- 72 Dionne Warwick and David Freedman Wooley, *My Life, As I See It: An Autobiography* (New York: Atria, 2010), 77-8; BacktoBacharach, "Dionne's Catalog Expanded and Remastered," *BacharachOnline*, May 29, 2013. I have cited the latter fan post here because it is the most comprehensive single recounting of Warwick's ownership struggles that I was able to find.
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- 79 See e.g., Anjali Vats, "Prince of Intellectual Property: On Creatorship, Ownership, and Black Capitalism in Purple Afterworlds," *Howard Journal of Communications* 30, no. 2 (2019): 114-28.
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- 82 Gail Mitchell, "Ray Charles Innovated in Business as Well as Music," *Reuters*, September 18, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-charles/ray-charles-innovated-in-business-as-well-as-music-idUSTRE68H0FI20100918>. Charles regained his masters in the early 1960s, before Warwick.
- 83 Fred Goodman, "Sam Cooke Had a Hammer," *Historynet.com*, 2017 www.historynet.com/how-sam-cookes-money-guy-changed-music-biz.htm.
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- 89 Shirley Halperin and Jeremy Helligar, "The Big Payback: How Pharrell Williams is Breaking the Chains of the Music Industry's Troubled Past," *Variety*, August 11, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/pharrell-williams-master-slave-industry-contracts-1234729237/>. Pharrell has evolved his stances on (intellectual) property and gender equity considerably since the days of the "Blurred Lines" dispute, becoming a vocal critic of exploitation in its many forms. Will Welch, "Pharrell on Evolving Masculinity and 'Spiritual Warfare,'" *GQ*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.gq.com/story/pharrell-new-masculinity-cover-interview>.
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- 96 *Ibid.*
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- 98 Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2006).
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- 100 Annelot Prins, "From Awkward Teen Girl to Aryan Goddess Meme: Taylor Swift and the Hijacking of Star Texts," *Celebrity Studies* 11.1 (2020): 144.
- 101 Constance Grady, "How the Taylor Swift-Kanye West VMAs Scandal Became a Perfect American Morality Tale," *Vox*, August 8, 2019, www.vox.com/culture/2019/8/26/20828559/taylor-swift-kanye-west-2009-mtv-vm-as-explained.
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- 2020); Francesca Sobande, "Spectacularized and Branded Digital (Re)Presentations of Black People and Blackness," *Television & New Media* 22.2 (February 1, 2021): 131–46.
- 103 Ibid.
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- 105 James, *supra* note 26, 7.
- 106 Jason Lipshutz, "Taylor Swift & Nicki Minaj's Twitter Argument: A Full Timeline of the Disagreement," *Billboard*, July 15, 2015, www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop-shop/6641794/taylor-swift-nicki-minaj-twitter-argument-timeline.
- 107 Judy L. Isaksen and Nahed Eltantawy, "What Happens When a Celebrity Feminist Slings Microaggressive Shade?: Twitter and the Pushback Against Neoliberal Feminism," *Celebrity Studies* 12.4 (2019): 549–64.
- 108 Lipshutz, *supra* note 106.
- 109 Prins, *supra* note 100.
- 110 Casey Lewis, "How Taylor Swift's Apology to Nikki Minaj Makes an Important Statement About Feminism," *Teen Vogue*, July 15, 2015, www.teenvogue.com/story/taylor-swift-nicki-minaj-twitter-apology.
- 111 Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (June 1993): 1707–91.
- 112 Vats and Keller, *supra* note 8, 758–9.
- 113 Taylor Swift, "Statement About Scooter Braun (Reprinted)," *The Daily Mail*, July 18, 2019, www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/fb-7262751/Taylor-Swifts-statement-Scooter-Braun.html.
- 114 Jeff Haden, "Taylor Swift's Masters Just Sold for \$300 Million, Revealing a Brutal Truth About Business," *Inc.com*, November 19, 2020, www.inc.com/jeff-haden/taylor-swifts-masters-just-sold-for-300-million-revealing-a-brutal-truth-about-business.html.
- 115 Paul Théberge, "Love and Business: Taylor Swift as Celebrity, Businesswoman, and Advocate," *Contemporary Music Review* 40.1 (January 2021): 41–59.
- 116 Josh Kun, cited in Shirley Halperin and Jeremy Helligar, "The Big Payday: How Pharrell Williams Is Breaking the Chains of the Music Industry's Troubled Past," *Variety*, August 11, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/pharrell-williams-master-slave-industry-contracts-1234729237/>.
- 117 Vats, *supra* note 79.
- 118 Arguably because of Brittany Spanos, "Kim, There's People That Are Dying," *Rolling Stone*, March 24, 2020, www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/kim-kardashian-taylor-swift-kanye-west-feud-famous-971734/.
- 119 The late Greg Tate's work on Jean-Michel Basquiat beautifully illuminates the artist's refusal of the narrative of white intellectual superiority and counter-articulation of one of Black brilliance. Greg Tate, "Jean-Michel Basquiat, Flyboy in the Buttermilk," *The Village Voice*, November 14, 1989, www.villagevoice.com/2019/07/29/jean-michel-basquiat-lonesome-flyboy-in-the-80s-art-boom-buttermilk/.
- 120 Indeed, some have gone so far as to ask whether "Famous" fits the legal definitions of revenge porn or obscenity. Karla Utset, "Drawing the Line: The Jurisprudence of Non-Consensual Pornography and the Implications of Kanye West's Famous Music Video Notes & Comments," *University of Miami Law Review* 72.3 (2018): 920–71. I say arguably not to dismiss the misogyny here but because the law is unsettled. "Famous" intentionally enters into gray area, raising consent issues, as indicated by an interview in which Desderio recounts a conversation with West about the "criminality of art." Nonconsensual representations of people, e.g., Trump, are also with precedent—and the ability to file suit in response has been deeply racialized in the United States. Rachel Martin, "A Chat with the Painter Whose Work Inspired Kanye West's 'Famous,'" *NPR*, July 3, 2016, www.npr.org/2016/07/03/484402517/a-chat-with-the-painter-whose-work-inspired-kanye-west-s-famous.
- 121 While it is still groundbreaking for women to be movers of history, as I noted earlier, achieving that recognition at the expense of people of color is problematic. See e.g., Rachel Dubrofsky, "A Vernacular of Surveillance: Taylor Swift and Miley Cyrus Perform White Authenticity," *Surveillance and Society* 16.2 (2016): 184–96.
- 122 Anjali Vats and LeiLani Nishime, "Containment as Neocolonial Visual Rhetoric: Fashion, Yellowface, and Karl Lagerfeld's 'Idea of China,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99.4 (2013): 425.
- 123 Ibid.
- 124 I reviewed approximately 200 articles about Taylor Swift and race, written from 2019 to the present. Running a Lexis+ news search for "Taylor Swift" w/25 (race or racism or racial! or "white nationalism" or "white supremacy") yielded approximately 3,500 total articles as of April 2022. For context, a Lexis+

- news search for “Taylor Swift” for the one year period from January 1, 2021–January 1, 2022 returned 10,000+ articles, even when grouped by “moderate similarity.” The articles about race thus represent a small fraction of the total media coverage about her, with the majority of them being written after January 1, 2015. I considered pieces that were written from January 1, 2019 on, which is when the rerecording controversy began. I narrowed the search by excluding articles containing the word “racing,” leaving me with approximately 200 discrete items, 180 of which were in English. My conclusions reflect a critical race studies and rhetoric informed assessment of the assembled archive, plus a selection of articles drawn from Google.
- 125 Brian Hiatt, “The *Rolling Stone* Interview: Taylor Swift,” *Rolling Stone*, September 18, 2019, www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/taylor-swift-rolling-stone-interview-880794/.
- 126 Ibid.
- 127 Kornhaber, *supra* note 2.
- 128 A Lexis+ news search for “Taylor Swift” w/25 (*Scooter Braun or masters or catalog or sound recordings*) for the period between January 1, 2019 now yielded approximately 3,800 articles as of April 2022. Requiring the terms “Black” or “people of color” in those articles produced approximately 400 hits, in English with the “moderate similarity” filters on. I reviewed these articles along with a handful of pieces that I located through Google searches on racial justice and masters controversies. Swift is frequently a case study for important, though historically complicated trajectories of musical ownership. Even legal scholars have begun taken her up as exemplar of ownership battles. See e.g., Delilah R. Cassidy, “You Belong With Me: Retaining Authorship and Ownership of Sound Recordings,” *Arizona State University Law Journal* 18.2 (2021): 240–64. This is understandable but complicated given the racial histories I outline.
- 129 Jon Blistein, “The Sisyphean Quest for a Good Record Deal,” *Rolling Stone*, June 15, 2021.
- 130 Ben Sisario and Joe Coscarelli, “Taylor Swift’s Feud With Scooter Braun Spotlights Musicians’ Struggles to Own Their Work,” *New York Times*, July 1, 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/07/01/arts/music/taylor-swift-master-recordings.html. An article in *Variety* on Blackout Tuesday also names the issue of Black erasure in masters conversations. Jem Aswad and Shirley Halperin, “Blackout Tuesday Was No Day Off for Labels, Managers: Will It Yield Real Results?” *Variety*, June 4, 2020. It is worth contrasting the way that Paula Cole recently spoke about her relationship to Black musicians, particularly Black women, and their investments in working toward racial and gender justice. Patrick Ryan, “Paula Cole ‘Patronized’ as Female Producer,” *Carlsbad Current-Argus*, May 26, 2021.
- 131 Victoria Sands, “Teardrops on My Guitar: Taylor Swift Losing Her Masters Is a Sexist Tale as Old as Time,” *bitchmedia.com*, July 8, 2019, www.bitchmedia.org/article/taylor-swift-scooter-braun-masters-fight.
- 132 Editors, “Taylor Swift, Taylor Swift, Taylor Swift,” *The Daily Free Press*, November 15, 2021, <https://dailyfreepress.com/2021/11/15/editorial-taylor-swift-taylor-swift-taylor-swift/>.
- 133 Kellie Chudzinski, “Nicki Minaj Compares Her Music Industry Battles to Taylor Swift’s... While Celebrating 12 Years Since Debut Mixtape,” *Mail Online*, July 6, 2019.
- 134 Chanté Joseph, “Back to Black: How the Record Industry Reckoned with Race This Year,” *The Guardian*, December 28, 2020.
- 135 Eric Smialek, “Who Needs to Calm Down? Taylor Swift and Rainbow Capitalism,” *Contemporary Music Review* 40.1 (January 2, 2021): 99–119. Swift responds to these very claims in Chris Willman, “Taylor Swift: No Longer ‘Polite at All Costs,’” *Variety*, January 21, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/features/taylor-swift-politics-sundance-documentary-miss-america-1203471910/>.
- 136 Ibid.
- 137 “Taylor Swift Celebrates Anita Baker for Owning Her Masters,” *Just Jared*, September 5, 2021, www.justjared.com/2021/09/05/taylor-swift-celebrates-anita-baker-for-owning-her-masters/. One article centered on Baker’s masters negotiations names Swift in a line of Black musicians seeking the same outcome after years of exploitation and dispossession. Noah Berlatsky, *The Independent*, March 16, 2021.
- 138 Red Chidgey, “Postfeminism™: Celebrity Feminism, Branding and the Performance of Activist Capital,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 7 (October 3, 2021): 1055–71.
- 139 While some might claim that Beyoncé engages in the same political strategy, I disagree. As many scholars and critics have observed, Beyoncé’s body is political by virtue of its Blackness. Her politics may have evolved but she never had access to the same privileges of disengagement that Swift did.
- 140 Eden Osucha, “The Whiteness of Privacy: Race, Media, Law,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 24.1 (2009): 78.
- 141 Heran Mamo, “Taylor Swift Fans React to Latest Sale of Her Masters (& Get Hyped Up for Rerecorded Songs),” *Billboard*, November 16, 2020, www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/9485174/swifties-reactions-taylor-swift-re-recording-albums-after-latest-masters-sale/.

INTERROGATING CASTE, GENDER, AND CITIZENSHIP IN POST-PARTITION BENGAL

Anandita Pan

History will never write the story of their struggle, bloodshed, and suffering. Stories of their survival will be lost. Or, there distorted versions will be reproduced elsewhere.

—*Shaktipada Rajguru, Dandak Theke Marichjhapi (From Dandak to Marichjhapi)*¹

On the morning of January 31, 1979, a few women of the Dalit refugee groups who had settled in Marichjhapi, attempted to brave the economic blockade of Marichjhapi announced by the West Bengal Government (which was imposed to force the settlers to leave West Bengal), and tried to cross the river to procure medicines, drinking water, and food grains from the next island. Their attempt was met with resistance from the police stationed at Marichjhapi. The police rammed the boats and the women were drowned.² In fact, violence against women became the starting point of the massacre in Marichjhapi. The refugee women were taken to the police station by force and were gang raped for days.³ These events caused confrontations between the refugees and the police. From the beginning, this confrontation was unequal. The refugees' makeshift tool and weapons expectedly fell short at retaliating the guns. The refugees were shot at, tear-gassed, their settlements were destroyed, and several hundred died of starvation. This event came to be known as the massacre of Marichjhapi in 1979.

This article sets its premise on the second partition of Bengal⁴ in 1947 which is tarnished by bloodied histories of the Marichjhapi massacre and socio-economic exclusion of Dalit refugees. Citizenship takes an interesting turn at the intersection of caste, gender, and the refugee identity. The rhetoric of citizenship, as I explore in the next section, under the garb of resolving the *refugee problem*, functioned as a justification for caste and gender oppression.⁵ The Marichjhapi massacre forces us to see that violence inflicted on Dalit women refugees is not merely a result of their sex; it is a structural issue where Dalit women's bodies are made into sites to exercise control. I propose that there is a need for a new framework to adequately address issues of political exclusion, naturalization of sexual violence on Dalit women, and the lack of an intersectional lens in mainstream feminist and Dalit politics in India. To this end, I examine the sexed bodies of Dalit women refugees as sites of caste oppression, and analyze violence as stemming from casteist sexism. Owing to the inadequacy of existing feminist and Dalit frameworks in addressing the specificities of casteist-sexist violence on Dalit women, I propose "intersectional standpoint" as a new framework for analysis.

An intersectional standpoint uses intersectionality⁶ as a tool to develop a conscious positionality. Intersectionality questions the homogenization of categories such as “woman” and “Black” by recognizing that there are multiplicities and differences within these two categories. In Dalit feminism, the method of intersectional standpoint aims to achieve an epistemological intervention. At the core of Dalit feminism is the understanding that “Dalit woman,” which is its primary constituency, is located at the intersection of caste and gender. Dalit women are not monolithic entities who can be neatly categorized either as “women” or “Dalits.” In mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit politics, caste and gender are considered two individual and mutually exclusive categories defining “women” and “Dalits” respectively. As a result, Dalit women and their concerns get erased or subsumed.⁷ An intersectional perspective also makes it possible to bring in its intersectional purview other systems, such as class and community. The simultaneity and mutually constitutive intersection of these structures is used to see how knowledge about monolithic categories and concepts as developed by mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit politics gets transformed. Standpoint, then, refers to a conscious positionality obtained by the researcher. A standpoint is the foundation of a politicized new knowledge when it is used to understand and consciously intervene into dominant knowledge systems (Harding 2004, 6–7). In feminist theory, standpoint is envisioned as emerging from women’s experiences to achieve a political understanding of the interconnected frameworks of patriarchy, race, and knowledge with respect to women’s subordination (Smith 2004). Hence, the agenda of feminist standpoint is not merely archiving women’s life experiences, but to understand how power structures enforce and retain hierarchies.

This recognition, as Crenshaw (1991) notes, can become crucial in social justice movements and legal systems to rectify homogenization and seek a more effective solution for groups that are marginalized even within marginal groups, such as women of color (1242–5). Commenting on the importance of particularity in intersectionality, Catharine MacKinnon notes that particularity does not mean considering knowledge arising from the experience of a particular group as narrow, static, and restrictive, rather particularity is invoked to provide a more nuanced understanding of systems. Intersectionality as a method therefore foregrounds the need to recognize difference and build solidarity, which may be accomplished through the development of a standpoint. This is why Harding (2004) writes, “a standpoint cannot be thought of as an ascribed position with its different perspective that oppressed groups can claim automatically. Rather, a standpoint is an achievement, something for which the oppressed groups must struggle” (8). At the root of a Dalit feminist intersectional standpoint is the awareness that its marginalized position is significant in its ability to both intervene and transform existing knowledge systems.⁸ This perspective valorizes marginality as a resource and sees marginality as a politically achieved position. This is the precise reason why in Dalit feminism, the identity category “Dalit woman” becomes the constituency whose experiences of simultaneously being oppressed by structures of caste and gender becomes the starting point for achieving an intersectional standpoint. A Dalit feminist standpoint is a position that critically examines *how* intersections function in relation to dominant power structures. It is this perspectival privilege through which Dalit feminist intersectional standpoint emerges as an effective tool to unravel the complexities of dominant structures and challenge them.

This article, through the methodology of “intersectional standpoint,” reads the intersection of caste, gender, and citizenship in the following manner: the first section of the paper conceptualizes violence on Dalit women emerging from interlocking structures of caste and gender. In the second section, I focus on *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*, the first autobiography by a Bengali Dalit woman, Kalyani Thakur Charal, to understand how the status as a refugee creates a different experiential reality for Dalit women.

49.1 The making of Marichjhapi

The causes of the massacre of Marichjhapi are mired in the history of the partition of Bengal and the intricacies of caste, class, and communal hierarchies. As developed by Jalais (2005) and Mallick (1999), politics in Bengal shaped into a specifically “Hindu *bhadralok* politics”⁹ owing to the powerful East Bengal Namasudra¹⁰ movement in the colonial period which, in alliance with the Muslims, kept the Bengal Congress Party in opposition from the 1920s.¹¹ In her analysis of the refugee settlement as impacted simultaneously by caste and class, D. Sengupta (2011) notes that

Immediately after the country was divided, the middle-class and white-collared population who came to the state did not require large-scale rehabilitation, as they were sufficiently solvent to relocate by their own efforts. After 1952, the demographic and occupational character of the refugees changed, and relief now provided by government agencies was more in the context of displacement and not in the context of riots as was the case earlier. This led to a major alteration in the state’s relief policies of the 1950s.

(103)

At this point, it is important to unpack the complex relation between caste and citizenship in Bengal. By 1949, the government of West Bengal had decided to rehabilitate only 100,000 refugees (out of 1.6 million refugees) within the state and sent the rest to Assam, Orissa, Bihar, Coochbehar, and Tripura. The 1957 saw a sharp decline in refugee migration from East Bengal to West Bengal after the government of India posed stringent rules for migration.¹² In order to tackle the influx of refugees in large numbers, the state sought the help of the central government and places such as Andaman Islands and Dandakaranya were formally designated for “resettlement of Displaced Persons” (Sengupta 2011, 104). These settling colonies were marked by caste and class. The moneyed upper-caste *bhadralok* refugees, due to their elite connections and intimate knowledge of various departments of the government of West Bengal, could refuse to stay in the government allocated areas for refugees and could design their own settlements in the prominent outskirts of the city. The poorest refugees, however, had no option but to opt for government rehabilitation centers. As tackling the large number of refugees became increasingly difficult for the state,¹³ refugees were dispersed to the Andaman Island and Dandakaranya, majority of whom were the Namasudras. The caste–class connotations in such allocation is undeniable. The *bhadralok* refugees were not only “desperate to avoid entering government camps,” they were also “eager to maintain a social distance” from refugees who did not belong to the same level of “respectability” (U. Sen 2018, 194). This marked as a justification to replicate caste hierarchies within the settlers’ colonies.

Ross Mallick (1999) observes that Muslims and Dalits were treated as “untouchables” owing to the class and communal differences *vis-à-vis* the Hindu upper-caste landlords—a difference that was intensified through the Muslim–Dalit unity during the Namasudra movement in the 1920s. After the partition of 1947, the Congress government in Bengal “effectively broke up the Namasudra movement and scattered the caste in refugee colonies outside Bengal, thereby enhancing the dominance of the traditional Bengali tricast elite” (Mallick 1999, 104–5). The newly independent India, therefore, constituted its citizens by retaining caste hierarchy.¹⁴

With the election of the Left Front party in 1977 as the “new popular government” the Congress government had fallen (Sengupta 2011, 116). One of the biggest selling points of Left Front party was the assurance of refugee relocation from Dandakaranya to the Sunderban (Sengupta 2011, 177;

Mallick 1999, 107). The futility of this assurance was soon felt by the refugees who were either arrested and/or returned to Danakaranya. Those who did manage to evade the police, settled in Marichjhapi island. This led the Left Front government to declare Marichjhapi as a reserve forest and the refugees as violating the Forest Acts who were destroying “the existing and potential forest wealth and also creating ecological imbalance.”¹⁵ Upon the refugees’ refusal to leave Marichjhapi, the West Bengal government declared an economic blockade on January 26, 1979.

49.2 No country for Dalits: rescripting rape

Citizenship, as defined by the Constitution of India, has attracted immense debate and dissent since the first drafting of the Citizenship Act in 1955 which specifies that Indian citizenship may be acquired by birth, by descent, through registration, by naturalization, and by incorporation of territory into India.¹⁶ This new nation, according to Haimanti Roy, “produced categories, debated within the hallowed halls of officialdom in Delhi, Calcutta, and Dacca, and given legal sanction through ordinances and laws debated and passed by parliamentary and state legislations” (Roy 2012, 4). The subject of Constitution and citizenship gained renewed attention with the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 when the Indian government, ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party, allegedly attempted to implement its highly popular claim of Hindu unification. Unlike the 1955 Act, the 2019 Act recognized illegal migrants of Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian religious minorities, who had fled persecution from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan before December 2014 and took shelter in India. It did not include Muslim refugees from those countries under the same circumstances. Consequently, this policy has been criticized for implementing religious segregation¹⁷ and is seen as a move to construct a “Hindu” India (Bandyopadhyay and Chaudhury 2014, 5). The post-partition India struggled to turn colonial subjects into national citizens. In this context, the identity as a “Hindu” served as a means to “otherize” the Muslim dominated Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and unify “Hindu Indians” against an imagined Islamic oppression.¹⁸ This new category incorporated Dalit refugees within its fold.¹⁹ Bandyopadhyay and Choudhury (2014), explaining the extant of such appropriation, note that when the Namasudra peasants fought for social justice under the Left party in 1948,

the state in Pakistan represented the Namasudra peasant rebels as “Hindu” miscreants. This process of “Othering,” not only tended to exclude them from the Pakistani nationhood by imposing on them a “Hindu” identity, but also helped the corresponding Hindu nationalism in India in trying to appropriate them as oppressed Hindu minority.

(3)

Roy further adds that,

these identities were produced discursively, mediated through the actions of officials located at the periphery of the nation, especially at the borders and diplomatic missions ... Implicit within these redefinitions were the attempts of each state to establish a minority citizen’s loyalty to the state.

(Roy 2012, 5)

In a detailed historical investigation of the question of caste and caste prejudice within progressive Bengali society, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (2009) reveals that in “the complex interplay

between social and ideological factors and political circumstances ... caste was as much a potent factor in determining social relations in colonial Bengal as it was in any other region of India” (456). Thus, strategic segregations, such as in Dandakaranya and the Andaman Islands, was not only directed to resolve the “refugee problem,” it also absorbed within itself the Brahmanical hierarchization through caste.

Caste in Bengal remains a precarious topic of discussion. For decades the so-called politically aware Bengali community has tried to hide and negate caste, a reality laid bare by the experiences of Bangladeshi Dalit refugees. However, it is also important to mention that these experiences are neither homogeneous, nor universal. Herein, the issue of gender as a category intersectional with caste becomes important. As mentioned earlier, the Marichjhapi massacre began with police brutality directed toward Dalit women. Some survivors recount how the police killed a few Dalit women by drowning their boats, and how Dalit women were taken to the police station by force and were gang raped for days.²⁰ These events cause confrontation between the refugees and the police, the ultimate outcome of which was that massacre of Marichjhapi. Dalit women refugees, therefore, became the immediate victims of the structural consequences of caste, partition, relocation, and government policy.

In this context, Catherine A. MacKinnon’s (2013) reading of the genocide in Bosnia in 1995 may be useful. MacKinnon criticizes the legal representation of the issue as solely a matter of racial or ethnic discrimination and points out that

the destruction of the women of an ethnic community through rape [should be] recognized as destroying their community. Genocide was not marginalized; instead, women were made central in its more capacious frame ... The fact that this genocide was in part conducted through gender crimes did not mean that the acts were not also ethnically and nationally and religiously destructive. It meant they were.

(1026–7)

MacKinnon thus provides an important corrective in the dominant understanding of rape as solely “gender violence,” instead reframing it through the intersectional lens. The intricate link between gender and race/ethnicity is also explored by Crenshaw (1991) in analyzing sexual violence on immigrant women. She points that despite the existence of Immigration and Nationality Act passed by Congress in 1990, many immigrant women settled in the US through marriage, did not report domestic abuse due to fear of being deported, lack of access to resources, and linguistic and financial barriers. Crenshaw notes that such predetermined categories mostly benefited white upper-class women and strategically disqualified the women of color. Crenshaw’s analysis shows the failure of the social welfare systems in addressing the specificities of oppression based on race, gender, and class (1246–50). Similarly, the rapes of Dalit women in Marichjhapi massacre need to be rescripted within the broader frameworks of caste and citizenship, and it must be realized how control over a community is exercised by making gender oppression central.

The India Penal Code, Section 375, defines rape as a situation where “a man has sexual intercourse with a woman” against her will, without her consent, with/without her consent when she is under 16 years of age, and with her consent but under “unsoundness of mind or intoxication.”²¹ Rape, therefore, is seen as an expression of male sexual domination. Women’s sexual vulnerability, however, is not a structural consequence of gender alone. Their caste, class, and racial identities are also responsible for inflicting specific types of violence on different women.²² Caste-based gender violence are often visibilized in two forms—public gang rape and custodial rape. Public gang rape, as Irudayam, Mangubhai, and Lee observe, is a specific

phenomenon often executed against Dalit women as a means to suppress any display of defiance of untouchability: “While in some instances the perpetrators of violence belong to one homogeneous dominant caste, there are instances where they cut across all dominant caste lines, that is, backward caste and forward caste” (Irudayam et al. 2006, 9). Violence on Dalit women, therefore, serves as a means to control not just the women but the entire Dalit community. Public gang rape and custodial rapes are often used as powerful tools to emasculate the entire community.²³ In the words of Kannabiran and Menon (2007):

Gender within caste society is defined and structured in such a manner that the “manhood” of the caste is defined both by the degree of control men exercise over women, and the degree of passivity (and complicity) of the women of the caste. By the same token, demonstrated control by humiliating women of another caste is a sure-fire way of reducing the “manhood” of those castes. Spaces, domestic and public, are similarly structured along lines of caste and gender.

(22)

A reading of rape as an event caused with the specific intention of emasculating an entire community, reorients our focus from rape as “gender violence” to rape as a mechanism of control imposed by a casteist patriarchy. Rape as a form of community control and subordination inflicted on women’s bodies is a crucial way of using intersectionality to read sexual violence. The rapes of Dalit women in Marichjhapi massacre, similarly, can be rescripted within the broader frameworks of caste and citizenship, and realized how control over a community is exercised by making gender oppression central. Thus the rapes in Marichjhapi massacre need to be understood not as *part* of police brutality on refugees; the brutality took shape keeping the Dalit women *at the centre*. As Maria Mies argues, “Women are seen as the only property that pauperized men still possess. The rape of their women teaches poor men the lesson that their status is one of absolute powerlessness and propertylessness” (Mies et al. 1988, 138). Violence inflicted on women’s bodies, therefore, is utilized as a tool to oppress and suppress the marginalized community as a whole.

49.3 Through their eyes

In challenging the official narrative of the “refugee problem” cutting across caste, class, and gender, followed by resettlement in a new place, Bengali refugee Dalit women’s autobiographical narratives²⁴ can be read as providing crucial insights into some of the following questions: what did Bangladeshi Dalit women experience in post-partition West Bengal? How does their identity as “Dalit women refugees” intervene and transform the ways we understand caste and citizenship in post-partition Bengal? At the time when Dalit feminist movements across India have started to engage with the complexities of caste and gender *vis-à-vis* religion, community, class, and environment, Bengali Dalit women’s writings can provide a different and new layer of understanding through an intersectional perspective and an unconventional counter-narrative. This section explores these problematic through Kalyani Thakur Charal’s autobiography, *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*.

Ami Keno Charal Likhi (2016), literally meaning *Why I Write Charal*, is rooted in the construction of her identity as a “Dalit woman refugee.” The author, Kalyani Thakur Charal, mentions that after their arrival in West Bengal (India), they faced caste discrimination and changed their surname to “Thakur.” This attempt to erase caste stigma by changing the surname did not ensure a change in one’s caste identity. The author narrates how she experiences caste discrimi-

nation in school despite having a surname not indicative of her caste. That is why she decides to add “Charal”²⁵ her surname. She mentions an incident on her first day at an office—

One by one people came and interviewed me ... Once they left, I saw the fox-like Dey *babu* and Bhattacharya *babu* whispering among themselves, “Which caste?” To this I loudly replied, “Charal.” My sudden bold proclamation shocked everyone. They were not used to a Dalit openly identifying his/her caste.

(*Thakur Charal, 2016, 82*)²⁶

Thakur Charal considers the proclamation of her Dalit identity as agential. This sensitivity comes from her disillusionment that a change in surname never ensures erasure of caste (Thakur Charal 2016, 45). She gets an education, gets a job, but soon realizes that these institutions are the locations where caste is continually implemented and reproduced.

While displacement was a common experience for refugees, it had specific consequence for Dalit women. Thakur Charal writes,

It was common among poor Dalit refugees to sell their girl children in exchange of money. They took my aunt’s daughter to Delhi in promise of giving work. She did not know that she was sold. Next day she sent a post-card begging uncle to bring her back. When I demanded to see that post-card, uncle angrily retorted that it is lost.

(*Thakur Charal, 2016, 35*)

While refugee women (especially those without the protection of men) were often subject to rapes and abductions,²⁷ the specificity of Dalit women refugees’ condition (as seen in case of Thakur Charal’s cousin) is a result of caste, gender, and poverty. U. Sen (2018) notes,

Within the population of East Bengali refugees, those most able to actualise an alternative vision of rehabilitation were the relatively elite *bhadraloks* from eastern Pakistan who had fallen upon hard times, but were far from destitute. In stark contrast, the most marginalised amongst the refugees—the *Namasudra* peasants of eastern Bengal—towed the line of official policy and completely internalised the hegemonic discourse of rehabilitation.

(246)

Sen’s argument reveals the close interlink between caste and class. For the moneyed upper-caste refugees, access to government rehabilitation was easy due to their caste and class. The segregation of Dalits in distant rehabilitation camps indicate the perpetuation of the stigma untouchability. Although a few *Namasudra* leaders like P. R. Thakur and Jogendranath Mandal resisted such government rehabilitation and used their religious and political influence to settle in Calcutta in their own terms,²⁸ Thakur Charal mentions that upper caste and Dalit refugees in Calcutta lived on different sides of the street (Thakur Charal 2016, 12–14). Coupled with untouchability was poverty which pervaded the lives of Dalit refugees. Dalit women, sold and used, experienced the structural and economic consequences of caste, class, and gender. Gender oppression within Dalit refugees was also a common practice. Charal recounts innumerable incidents, including her own sister’s gang rape, pregnancy before marriage, pregnancy of widows, severe domestic violence on the girls at their in-laws’ houses, and desertion by husbands.

A significant contribution of Thakur Charal’s autobiography is in highlighting the erasure of caste-specific violence on Dalit women by mainstream feminism and Dalit politics. She also

mentions the categorical erasure/ignorance of caste in gender in mainstream academia and activism. She refers to how a noted film critic who boldly talks about caste, refuses to touch any books while visiting Thakur Charal's book stall. The inherent hypocrisy of the Bengali intelligentsia—who speak of caste but refuse to “touch” books sold by Dalits—is also pointed out by Thakur Charal in another instance where a prominent Bengali feminist pronounces that they believe in “feminism but not in casteism” (Thakur Charal 2016, 129). She writes, “If educated feminists make such remark, where would we go?” (Thakur Charal 2016, 130).

Thakur Charal's observation gestures toward the failure of mainstream Indian feminism to attend to the intersections of caste and gender. This failure, as Rege (2006) remarks, can be seen as caught between the complex net of guilt and ignorance.²⁹ The inadequacy of an intersectional approach renders Dalit women and their concerns as a separate politics, or are included as tokens. It is these practices of separatism and addition that are challenged by the Dalit feminist intersectional standpoint. As a remedy to such ghettoization, there is an urgent need to transform “their” cause to “our” cause wherein solidarity is “achieved ... rather than ascribed” (Rege 1998, 45; Patil 2013, 42). The praxis of an intersectional standpoint is established on Dalit women's experiences and articulations while simultaneously unravelling the complexities of caste and gender in texts and issues that are viewed predominantly through the lens of either caste or gender. In this way, Dalit feminism challenges its conceptualization as a ghettoized politics relevant only to Dalit women, instead asserting its value as a standpoint that fundamentally transforms the fields of mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit politics.

49.4 Conclusion

Strategic erasure of the “caste question” in feminism and “gender” in Dalit politics continues to remain a matter of immense debate in Dalit feminism (Rege 1998; Patil 2013). The Marichjhapi massacre and *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* explore how Dalit women refugees became the immediate victims of the structural consequences of caste, partition, relocation and government policy. The recent Citizenship Amendment Bill viewed skeptically by the Dalit Matua³⁰ community in Bengal who had supported BJP in 2014 elections with hopes to be included as citizens of India, further highlights the volatile situation of the refugees. Their narrative, however, remains silent on the issue of gender. In focalizing on citizenship, gender is completely ignored. Writings by Dalit women refugees, therefore, are even more necessary because they highlight the perpetual silencing of gender in Dalit politics and introduce a new angle in caste–gender theorization through the complexity of citizenship.

The caste–gender intersectional lens revises the dominant notion of patriarchy understood only through gender relations, and Dalit politics' notion of caste system as the primary source of oppression for all members of the Dalit community irrespective of gender. The interconnection between caste and gender emphasizes the need to recognize difference among women and Dalits. It is for this reason that I re-envision the theoretical framework as intersectional standpoint. This framework recognizes difference as a crucial methodological category (in enabling affinity and not separatism) and uses intersectionality as a tool to generate new epistemology. Dalit feminism's affinity-based politics marks a shift from homogeneity to the acknowledgment of difference in seeing how different structures, through their intersection with gender, affect different groups of women differently. In their 2008 report the Dalit Mahila Samiti (2008) mentioned,

The agenda of the women's movement at the national level is still framed by middle-class women's perspectives ... Issues of identity are difficult to incorporate into the

national movement, and mainstream Indian feminists need to bring in the politics and priorities of other identities. For instance, when national women's groups would determine that the focus of Women's Day events would be violence against women, but for the local women, the critical issue was access to water.

(11)

The women in DMS invite the men to become *sathi dars* (literally meaning “givers of support”). Commenting on the importance of particularity in intersectionality, MacKinnon (2013) notes that particularity does not mean considering knowledge arising from the experience of a particular group as narrow, static, and restrictive. Rather particularity is invoked to provide a more nuanced understanding of the interlocking ways in which systems operate (1026). Thakur Charal also ends her autobiography alluding to coalition. She refers to a workshop organized in Pondicherry in 2012 by Sparrow Women Archive that brought together 12 Dalit women writers from six states across India. This workshop consisted not only of Dalit women writers sharing their writings it also showcased drama, autobiographical accounts, narratives by Dalit women activists and so on. This workshop highlighted Dalit women's organizational power and the need to build solidarity across regions, cultures, and modes of articulation. The identity that Thakur Charal creates as a “Dalit woman” is hence an affinity-based identity.

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Notes

- 1 Translation is mine.
- 2 According to an eyewitness, there were several instances of refugee boats being rammed by police launches and sunk mid-river. Another witness recounts how they could “almost smell the inspector's naked rage” when the police launch came close to their boats (Halder 2019, 38).
- 3 Raped bodies hanging from trees were a common sight during the massacre (Halder 2019, 37). See, D. Halder (2019), *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre*, HarperCollins; and N. Mitra (2006), “Illegitimate”: 297–312.
- 4 The first partition of Bengal in 1905 stemmed from the colonial attempt to break Bengal's unity; while the communal sentiments influenced the second partition in 1947.
- 5 Ross Mallick (1999) recounts how, prior to the Marichjhapi massacre, men were separated from women and sent to jails, and the women were raped by the police at random (110). This two-pronged method of control, imposed through separation, ensured the suppression of Dalit refugee community as a whole. Through physical violence on Dalit men, the police proved caste supremacy, and the sexual violence on Dalit women highlighted the emasculation of Dalit men who were unable to save their women. For a detailed analysis of violence on Dalit women as a way to emasculate the Dalit community, see Rege (1998).
- 6 The notion of intersectionality arose out of the theorization by feminists of color which focused on the triply oppressed Black women. Crenshaw takes Black women as an example and shows how intersectionality rejects the single-axis framework often embraced by both feminist and anti-racist scholars,

- analyzing instead “the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women’s ... experiences” (Crenshaw 1991, 1244).
- 7 A more recent example of such erasure is the Una March (2016). Built on the ideology of “land to the tillers,” the Una march linked caste with class through its interpretation of the caste system as material oppression functioning through ownership of land. The Una march, however, also saw strategic erasure of Dalit women and the issue of gender. Sanghapali Aruna Lohitakshi, a Dalit feminist activist reminisced that in Una, “barely any other Dalit women were allowed to speak. At the end, Manisha Mashaal [another Dalit woman activist from Haryana] tried to step up to the mic, but one of the men on stage actually grabbed her hand and tried to pull her back. She had to physically pull herself free to be able to go up and speak.” The Una march thus exemplifies the erasure of gender in Dalit politics. Similarly, the erasure of caste in feminism was made visible through the #MeToo movement. In their discussion of the #MeToo movement, Dalit feminists highlighted the importance of intersectionality by criticizing the shortcoming of mainstream Indian feminism in failing to address the cause of Dalit women and the issue of caste. Dalit feminists invoked Bhanwari Devi’s gang rape case to show how the specificity of caste–gender violence on Dalit women is erased in the generalized interpretation of “sexual harassment in the workplace” in the Vishakha guidelines (see note 23). For a detailed reading see, Ananya (2016), Rowena (2017), and Stephen (2018).
 - 8 In the advocacy of marginalization as a valuable perspectival position, Dalit feminism aligns with Black feminist standpoint as conceptualized by Chela Sandoval in her article, “U.S. Third World Feminism” (1991) and bell hooks in “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” (2004). bell hooks sees margin as a “space of radical openness” which enables Black women to formulate an oppositional consciousness for survival and resistance (2004, 153).
 - 9 Joya Chatterji (1994) defines “Hindu *bhadralok* politics” in caste, class, and communal lines. The term *bhadralok*, generally meaning “gentleman,” obtained Hindu upper caste–class connotations during the colonial period. Chatterji posits the emergence of the *bhadralok* politics in 1930s as a reaction to the Namasudra movement and their alliance with Muslims. The Hindu *bhadralok* politics came to embody a sentiment of “unity” based on Brahmanical and communal privilege of the upper-caste Hindus (191).
 - 10 Namasudra refers to a Dalit group in Bengal currently consisting mostly of Dalit migrants from East Bengal.
 - 11 This is in line with the arguments made by Sekhar Bandopadhyay (1997) in *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872–1947*, Curzon Press; and Joya Chatterji (1994).
 - 12 The new rules required applicants to have relations in West Bengal willing to give them shelter. It also stated that migrants would not get any benefits of rehabilitation in West Bengal (Sen 2018, 71).
 - 13 By 1957, the Union Minister announced that “there was no more room for Refugee Rehabilitation in West Bengal. Over 40 lakhs of Hindus had already come from East Pakistan and of them a little over 30 lakhs were in West Bengal alone. During the last two years, 1955 and 1956, the exodus had been the heaviest, the figures being 560,000” (Sengupta 2011, 104).
 - 14 The Namashudras, in fact, did organize massive protests in West Bengal under the leadership of Jogendranath Mandal, Apurbalal Mazumdar, and Hemanta Biswas, after the July 1959 declaration of the closing of all refugee camps and discontinuation of relief. However, it was unable to draw support from the government or the people. For details of these notices and the resistance of refugees see Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men* (1999), 177–207.
 - 15 Letter from the Deputy Secretary, Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of West Bengal, quoted in Jalais (2005, 1759).
 - 16 Section 2(1)(b) of the Citizenship Act, 1955. www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/4210/1/Citizenship_Act_1955.pdf.
 - 17 The policy was criticized by the UN Human Rights Commission for undermining equality and for being fundamentally discriminatory (press briefing on India, 13 December 2019). Nation-wide protests, especially the Northeast region of India, revealed the dangers of religious and cultural exclusions caused by CAA 2019. See www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25425&LangID=E.
 - 18 Partha Chatterjee (1997) compares the two partitions of Bengal—1905 and 1947—in showing how the former was implemented by the colonizers to break the power of a “united Bengal” the latter propelled by communal sentiments (28).
 - 19 An example of appropriating Dalits within the “Hindu” fold is Gandhi’s “Harijan” movement. The “Harijan” (literally meaning “people of Hari,” a Hindu god), was an ideology put forth by Gandhi to unite all Hindus against the colonial rule. The inclusion of Dalits within this category, “Harijan,” not

- only ignored the different religious practices prevalent among several Dalit communities, it erased/naturalized the centuries of oppressions caused by the Brahmanical Hinduism. Gandhi's Harijan movement whitewashed the issue of caste both in religious and political realms. Ambedkar, on the other hand, insisted that the untouchables were a separate and legitimate social category, and not part of Brahmanical Hinduism.
- 20 See Halder, Deep. (2019). *Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre*, HarperCollins; N. Mitra (2006). "Illegitimate." In B. Fraser and S. Sengupta (eds.), *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter*, Anthem, 297–312.
 - 21 <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/623254/> retrieved on March 2, 2021.
 - 22 Crenshaw gives the example of institutionalized discrimination which fails to accommodate difference in terms of race and gender. These institutions' view of oppression as emerging from a single axis forces them to view racism and sexism as two mutually exclusive structures, thereby completely ignoring/erasing women of color who are affected by both.
 - 23 An example of Dalit women's public rape as a corrective to the entire family/community is the Bhanwari Devi rape case. Bhanwari Devi was a Saathin in Rajasthan who actively participated in preventing the marriage of a one-year-old girl. As retaliation she was raped by five upper-caste men in front of her husband. In a casteist society ruled by norms of Brahmanism, Bhanwari's prevention of child marriage was seen as a daring act. Her public rape, therefore, served as a means to assert the caste supremacy of the upper-caste rapists and also the emasculation of her husband, who despite being present at the scene, could not protect his wife. For a detailed study on casteist sexist violence, see Chapter 3 of my book, *Mapping Dalit Feminism: Towards an Intersectional Standpoint* (2020).
 - 24 Bengali Dalit literature holds special significance in the context of Bengal where the early arrival of Marxist ideology created a sense of political awareness among the Bengali intelligentsia who viewed oppression in terms of class and ignored/denied the existence of caste. Bengali Dalit literature challenges the belief that the Bengali educated, and left-aligned community is unmarked by caste (Biswas 2017, 15).
 - 25 A colloquial form of "chandal" in Bengali, the term "charal" refers to a person who cremates dead bodies for a living. This work is specifically given to the "untouchable" lower caste communities as cremation is considered a "polluted work." Associated with untouchability, this term signifies caste-based stigma.
 - 26 All translations from *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* hereafter are mine.
 - 27 Udit Sen (2018) notes how refugee women's hyper-visibility as the "chief sufferers" of gendered violence, is strategically erased from official narratives after rehabilitation (201). In the case of Dalit women refugees, such erasure leads to a linear analysis of violence only in terms of citizenship/caste. As a result, Dalit women are subsumed within the broader category of "Dalits." The specificities of caste and gender as intersectional is ignored.
 - 28 For details, see Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhuri, "Partition, Displacement and the Decline of the Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal," in *The Politics of Caste in West Bengal*, edited by Uday Chandra, Geir Heierstad, and K. B. Nielsen (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 60–82. P. R. Thakur also headed the Matua Mahasangha (MM), an organization that Thakur Charal mentions repeatedly in her autobiography.
 - 29 She writes that mainstream feminism often does not engage with Dalit feminism because it is either "frozen in guilt (what can 'we' say now, let 'them' speak)" (4) or resolves the issue of erasure by "adding" Dalit women to the existing framework (7).
 - 30 The Matua community, under the leadership of Harichand Thakur, formulated the Namasudra movement during 1860s.

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MONEY GOOD?

The problem and promise of Black women's prosperity

Chelsea Frazier

The status of Black women's economic prosperity in America remains precarious for a variety of reasons, and intersectionality has made legible the ways that various manifestations of discrimination on the basis of race and gender and economic disenfranchisement are inextricably linked. This essay both follows and critiques discursive hindrances to Black women's economic prosperity, as well as proposed strategies for the combatting of these hindrances. I examine key texts that gave rise to intersectionality as a critical framework in addition to considering recent cultural moments in order to critique key themes outlined by economists. Ultimately, I argue that while scholars often do put race, gender, and economic discrimination in conversation with each other, they do so in ways that avoid fundamental roots of the problems they diagnose with regard to the status of Black women's lives in America. Moreover, scholars often propose political and economic strategies for resistance and improvement that do not allow for the holistic restoration of Black women's economic prosperity or the equitable distribution of wealth between Black women and other social groups in the Americas.

50.1 Black feminists intervene: insights from the Combahee River Collective

Though intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to 1989 to make evident the ways that Black women experience both gender and racial discriminations from a legal standpoint,¹ the critical texts, statements, and activism that gave rise to its theoretical prominence can be traced back a further. In their 1977 statement, the Combahee River Collective (CRC) outline and diagnose various problems which critically and specifically affect Black women in America. While their assessments were made in 1977, the relevance and necessity of both their diagnoses and resolutions continue to provide grounding for the discourses, myths, and methods that have emerged from intersectionality. As the Combahee River Collective Statement explains,

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.²

While other political projects during CRC's tenure—namely Black nationalism and mainstream white feminism—were centering issues on the basis on race or gender separately, Black feminism took a different and sorely needed approach that recognized “that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.” As they explain, “Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes.”³

While they are often credited for their lucid and compelling account of racism and sexism in America, their account is, of course, equally reliant on an in-depth discussion of economics. They go on to note that, “A combined antiracist and antisexist position drew us together initially, and as we developed politically we addressed ourselves to heterosexism and economic oppression under capitalism.”⁴ Armed with a nuanced understanding of these interlocking oppressions,⁵ the CRC asserted that,

We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into Revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.⁶

In other words, their political strategies for addressing the problem of Black women's oppression are rooted in a desire to theorize the potential productivity of Black women's positions “at the bottom” of the racial, gender, and economic hierarchy in America. Their subject positions and identity allow the CRC to clearly recognize the ways that American culture and society fundamentally imposes limitations onto Black women. And they use their positionality as an opportunity to clarify how destroying those limitations benefits Black women, but also benefits everyone else. This dynamic of Black feminist discourse has continued to fuel its utility in and beyond academic space. And this—oft quoted point—was crucial for this emergent discourse. While many other political projects, Marxism, Black nationalism, and liberal feminism among them, often scapegoated the concerns of Black women—Black feminism and its theoretical progeny “intersectionality”—carried the promise of pathways to holistic social and cultural Revolution.

Zooming in a bit, it makes sense that many theorists and economists have focused particularly on Black women's economic status as a central problem to be solved in the path to elusive revolution. Rather than a structural problem, economists often frame Black women's economic oppression as a moral issue. In the contemporary moment, much attention has been paid to the economic status of Black Americans and the disparity of wealth and resources between Black people and nearly every other racial group in America. In their extensive study *Black Wealth, White Wealth*, Oliver and Shapiro argue that historically rooted discrimination explains reasons why the wealth inequality between Blacks and whites persists—even in the face of massive gains on the part of Black Americans. Discrimination and its effects are difficult to measure, and so Oliver and Shapiro look at public policy, historical conditions, and practices of discrimination in education and housing market to explain the ongoing and harrowing effects of racism. In their 1995 study, they write,

Our examination of contemporary conditions also found, more surprisingly, that equally positioned whites and blacks have highly unequal amounts of wealth. Matching whites and blacks on key individual factors correlated with asset acquisition, demonstrated the gnawing persistence of large magnitudes of wealth difference. Because it allows us to look at several factors at once, regression analysis

was then called into play. Even when whites and blacks were matched on all identifiably important factors, we could still not account for about three-quarters of the racial wealth difference. If white and black households shared all the wealth-associated characteristics we examined, blacks would still confront a \$43,000 net worth handicap!⁷

Essentially, what their findings show, is that even in cases where Blacks and whites might have equal amounts of education, legislative representation, asset acquisition, and even wage earnings (otherwise known as wealth-associated characteristics), Black Americans still must contend with a \$43,000 net worth handicap. This deficit is absurd, particularly because it applies to Black people that possess the most wealth-associated characteristics that Oliver and Shapiro examine. One of those characteristics is marriage. If we use Oliver and Shapiro's findings to ground an examination of more recent marriage and economic trends among Black families provided by the US census, the majority of Black women are unmarried during their child-bearing years.⁸ While the poverty rate of Black families with two married parents was 6.4 percent in 2019,⁹ the poverty rate of *unmarried* Black mothers in 2019 was 27.3 percent.¹⁰ We might also consider that the trends of Oliver and Shapiro's findings haven't shifted that much in recent years. According to a 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances published by the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, "the typical White family has eight times the wealth of the typical Black family and five times the wealth of the typical Hispanic family."¹¹ This survey and the authors of the accompanying report never specify how they qualify the word "typical," but given that the majority of Black families are comprised of single mothers, this recent data suggests that more often than not, it is single Black women that bear the brunt of the economic disparity and associated misfortune that can characterize Black life.

The Combahee River Collective were aware of these economic challenges and certainly made it clear how important it was for this class position of Black women to be addressed on a structural level. In their words:

We have arrived at the necessity for developing an understanding of class relationships that takes into account the specific class position of Black women who are generally marginal in the labor force, while at this particular time some of us are temporarily viewed as doubly desirable tokens at white-collar and professional levels. We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives. Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that this analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.¹²

In this passage the CRC is speaking back to and critiquing traditional notions of Marxism that do not take into account the specificities of the ways that race and gender effect particular subjects. While the CRC acknowledges that it is in fundamental agreement with Marxist principles, it remains unconvinced that an economic analysis that does not take into account the particularities of Black women's race and sex will be sufficient. The CRC also recognizes the importance of, and calls for an understanding of, their "specific economic situation as Black women." That said, I turn now to insights offered by contemporary economists doing research on Black women specifically to examine the ways in which analyses of Black women's economic positions have been addressed theoretically and materially over the past few decades.

50.2 Economists elucidate the limitations

Many contemporary economists—particularly those who specifically study Black women—characterize the economic status of Black women as better than it once was, yet still having “very far to go.” The implicit and sometimes explicit implication of this tenuous progress is that Black women have much more progress to make to in order to “catch-up” to the economic status of Black men, white women, and of course—economist’s ultimate measure of progress often listed first on surveys and reports—white men. In her, “Introduction to Articles on Black Women and Work,” Michelle Holder provides an overview that serves as an example of this. Holder writes, “that while Black women have made significant advances in the American labor market over the past four decades there is still further to go.”¹³ Of the significant advancements that Black women have made in the labor market, Holder explains that “black women as well as white women were instrumental in gender-diversifying the U.S. workforce, and in occupations [where] black women were initially unwelcome they created their own associations and pathways.”¹⁴ While these developments are certainly to be lauded—particularly with regard to the efforts women have made to improve upon their own economic positions—these gains have been quite limited in terms of overall wealth redistribution. Holder goes on to explain that

there is still a gender pay gap to which black women as well as white women are subject, and black female unemployment is still higher than that for white females. Measures such as affirmative action helped alleviate some of these disparities in the 1960s and 1970s, but the American political climate has turned the tide against race-based measures to improve employment and wage outcomes.¹⁵

Holder’s explication echoes the CRC when they assert that,

We have arrived at the necessity for developing an understanding of class relationships that takes into account the specific class position of black women who are generally marginal in the labor force, while at this particular time some of us are temporarily viewed as doubly desirable tokens at white-collar and professional levels.¹⁶

While Holder classifies the “gains” made by Black women as reflective of a “gender-diversifying of the U.S. workforce” and as “significant advances in the labor market,” the CRC identifies the same patterns as reflective of tokenization rather than diversification. Given the pay gaps experienced specifically by Black women, Holder asserts that, “Therefore it’s clear that in the coming decades Black women will once again need to create their own organizations and institutions to address the remaining race/gender gaps in pay and employment in the United States.”¹⁷ Both the CRC and Holder call for specific efforts to be made on the part of Black women to create their own organizations to address their specific economic situations, but their approaches have some fundamental differences that will become more clear through diagnoses offered by other Black women economists explored below.

In the publication, “The Invisible Woman: The Status of and Challenges Facing Black Women,” which serves as the preface to a symposium of the same name held at Bennett College, Kenney et al., do the work of summarizing the economic status of Black women as well. Their remarks carry a much more morally inflected tone than Holder’s, and that tone carries some troubling implications. Again, I reiterate that economists often implicitly frame Black female poverty as a moral crisis to which much attention must be paid. They are not incorrect in that the challenges that accompany widespread poverty in a single population cannot be understated. However, in their desire to draw attention to and diagnose the root of

such problems—the moral onus often still falls onto the shoulders of Black women—as if the problems that they sustain are largely or even entirely their fault. For example, as Nicole E. Kenney et al. write,

By the 1980's, Black women headed over half of the Black households and out-of-wedlock births were the leading cause. Due to their limited economic and human resources, low-income single Black mothers struggled to cover household expenses (e.g., food, childcare, etc.) and over one-half of these families lived in poverty.¹⁸

In their attempt to lucidly comment on what they understand to be the roots of Black women's economic disparity—particularly as they have been identified over the past 25 years—they begin their comments by articulating female-headed households and out-of-wedlock births as the causal problems. Following Moynihan's report (which is now infamous in Black feminist circles), Kenney et al.'s analysis does little to support the notion that matriarchal patterns within Black communities cannot and should not be pathologized in order to explain wealth disparities. These notions obscure a historically grounded understanding of Black women's *actual* control over their own economic status and reproductive lives from slavery to the present. After thinly situating the “pathology” historically, Kenney et al. goes on specify that,

Twenty-five years later, Black single parent families have increased significantly. Black women head over 60 % of Black households due to factors such as the shortage of men, delay in marriage, low marriage rates and the overall rise in cohabitation across the population. Research will show that early cohabitation rates among Blacks remain low in comparison to White and Hispanic Americans. However, Black women account for the second highest rate of out-of-wedlock births relative to other racial groups. Using the economic theory of fertility and marriage, we attempt to understand the growth of out-of-wedlock childbearing in the Black community. The theory suggests with men in short supply, low-income women are more likely to bear children outside of wedlock at their own cost, thereby driving down the costs of fatherhood. And the economic costs facing single Black mothers are tremendous. In 2008, the median income for single mother households was \$30,129 with Black and Latino single mother households yielding even less at \$25,011 and \$23,866, respectively. Limited jobs skills and education exacerbate these economic hardships as these limitations constrain low-income single Black mothers' earning potential in the future.¹⁹

For Kenney et al., heterosexual marriage—or lack thereof among Black women—is to blame for the economic disadvantage that continue to mire Black women's lives. As they point out, they use the “economic theory of fertility and marriage” to assess childbearing and marriage patterns in the Black community. At no point do they clarify why they use this particular approach to diagnose the problems they outline. Instead, it is implied that marriage and child-rearing in heteronormative, two-parent households is to be desired and is ultimately the best way to secure economic enfranchisement (perhaps even economic freedom) in America. Therefore, as Black women's marriage and child-rearing patterns fall outside of these paradigms, it is also implied that even though there are various problems within the larger socioeconomic American system that are outside of Black women's control, there is also something wrong with Black women's choices in response to that system. The numbers do not lie. Black women do certainly marry less frequently.²⁰ There is a problem however, with viewing the decisions that Black women make as the root of the problem as Kenney et al. do here.

As Holder mentions “that while Black women have made significant advances in the American labor market over the past four decades there is still further to go,”²¹ Kenney et al. elucidate these patterns further when discussing Black women in education. Education is one of the leading avenues through which wealth/wage gaps are examined because presumably, a westernized formal education, advanced skill acquisition, and professionalization yield more opportunities to acquire wealth. Kenney et al. note some significant gains, but also note complications that arise in tandem with these gains:

By the 1980s, Black women’s education gains began to erode. Black women were graduating from high school at higher rates; however, their dropout rates were higher than white women and men. In addition, Black women’s matriculation rate in higher education institutions decreased. Black women represented less than 5 % of students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions and even fewer Black women were represented at graduate and professional level schools. It is important to note that in absolute terms more Black women were earning degrees at all levels of higher education—a notable achievement. However, in relative terms, Black women’s degree attainment rate remained lower proportionately than white men and women. Several policy changes contributed to the erosion of Black women’s education gains, including the federal government’s reduction in financial assistance programs. In addition, the federal government distanced itself from education equity, which notably affected Black women and was demonstrated by the decline of Black women’s applications to graduate and professional schools.²²

What Kenney et al.’s findings reflect here, is a compelling depiction of the kinds of hindrances to “progress” that disproportionately effect Black women because of their race, gender, and of course class status. Though “Black women were earning degrees at all levels of higher education” by the 1980s despite myriad blockages to their access to various levels of education, the kinds of class-based disadvantages such as financial assistance reduction and the federal government’s disinterest in education equity ensured that by the 1980s many Black women who might have never had access to higher education would now have a chance. What these “gains” did not guarantee however is that the gaps and disparities in education level between Black women and other groups would be lessened. These disparities in education—in addition to other factors—had very tangible outcomes in terms of wage gaps in the 1980s as well. As Kenney et al. go on to explain,

During the 1980s, the proportion of Black women in service occupations was substantially higher than that for white women. In addition to occupational segmentation, Black women have lower lifetime earnings due to the racial wage gap. While Black women are more likely to be employed, they earn significantly less wages.²³

Kenney et al. focus on the 1980s as a crucial period in the trajectory of Black women’s economic advancement and do so in order to contextualize the fact that, “Presently Black women earn 64 cents for every dollar a white man earns.”²⁴

After framing the problems they see affecting Black women at alarming rates, Kenney et al. then begin to explain their engagements with existing and proposed opportunities for the improvement of Black women’s economic lives. As they explain,

Over the past 25 years, legislation, such as the Equal Pay Act, were enacted to protect women and minorities from labor market discrimination. However, Black women’s

benefits from these policies are mixed as Black women continue to experience discrimination in the labor market due to race and gender. To begin to remedy these disparities, President Obama passed the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act to restore victims' protection against wage discrimination based on age, religion, national origin, race, sex and disability. It is with cautious optimism that we hope this Act will significantly begin to improve the employment outcomes for Black women.²⁵

Kenney et al. themselves acknowledge that Black women's income volatility is rising and is connected to education level and marital statuses. According to them, these two prime factors—marital status and education level—contribute to the precarity of Black women's economic and social status. That said it is confusing how they can look to President Obama's Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act in order to “significantly begin to improve the employment outcomes for Black women.” There are many factors that disallow my optimism, but for the sake of my argument, I will just remark on two. Firstly, the Act is drafted to address a broad range of discriminatory practices, not just factors that directly address or target the improvement of Black women's employment outcomes specifically. Furthermore, even if the Act somehow greatly improved Black women's employment outcomes, given the history of correctives that the federal government has provided over the past 25 years from public assistance to affirmative actions (as outlined by Michelle Holder)—Black women—even as they make gains—do not make enough gains in comparison to white women, Black men, and especially white men to “level the playing field” in any conceivable way.

Kenney et al. characterize these sweeping liberal reforms as “measured progress,” but this characterization is misleading and the way that Kenney et al., cite these sweeping liberal reform measures as slight-but-complicated improvements in Black women's lives presents complications. Much of President Obama's legislation, in its attempts to ameliorate a broad range of stresses cannot, may improve some conditions of Black women. Black women, however, remain dangerously vulnerable to health, economic, and educational disadvantages and when reform or correctives are enacted, they affect Black women in less impactful ways while further securing the safety and protections of other groups. For example, Kenney et al. argue that

Before the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2011, decades passed since the passage of any major health care reform to address Black women's health. Fortunately, the Affordable Care Act represents a major overhaul of the Nation's healthcare system and it enables millions of Black women to have access to health care coverage. In addition, the bill includes provisions such as increasing Black women's access to preventative screenings such as mammograms, colonoscopies and immunizations, which are major steps to addressing the racial health disparities Black women face. We hope this legislation significantly improves the health outcomes of Black women because as Dr. Malveaux states “... maintaining the health of Black women is important to maintaining the health of the community.”²⁶

Kenney et al. are not necessarily wrong in their hope and even prediction that the affordable health care act has represented a significant overhaul in our nation's healthcare system and that by enabling millions of people—including Black women—access to basic healthcare and preventative screenings (that women overwhelmingly rely on) will improve the overall health of Black women. What they do not address however, is how things like the Affordable Care Act will address health *disparities*. Unfortunately, the improvement of Black women's health and/or

their ability to more easily afford basic healthcare does not compare to the gains that have been and will continue to be sustained among other less burdened populations.

Kenney et al., also identify the 2011, Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, which was “enacted to address the existing and entrenched structural and institutional barriers to wealth accumulation.” They go on to assert that, “It intends to promote financial stability and protect families from future unfair financial practices.” Again, Kenney et al. “recognize this Act as an important step to assist Black women in accessing fair and equal opportunities to build wealth and equity.”²⁷ But given the dire straits that Black women have found themselves in, while some—possibly even many—Black women will and have benefited from the newly drafted protections available under the Act, it is unlikely or rather impossible for this Act to address the kinds of wealth disparities that Oliver and Shapiro outline in their 1995 study.

Despite the bleakness of the economic situation they explain, Kenney et al. retain a tone of optimism and even faith in the potential of improvement of the current system and Black women’s positions in it. They explain that, “more research is warranted” and that, their “publication could not be timelier as new laws have the potential to either abate or exacerbate the socioeconomic disparities between Black women and other women.”²⁸ The patterns they outline, the positions of Black women historically, and logic offered by Oliver and Shapiro in their discussion of wealth disparities between Black and white however, demonstrate it is unlikely that these new laws—guised under their hoods of good intentions—will do much to abate socioeconomic disparities between Black women and other more financially secure populations. In all likelihood socioeconomic disparities will continue to increase even under these protections and though they retain the potential to improve some conditions in some Black women’s lives—ultimately these generalized legislative actions are treating symptoms rather than healing the roots of the problems.

Julianne Malveaux’s, “Still Slipping: African-American Women in the Economy and in Society,” follows similar patterns to Kenney et al. with regard to diagnoses of Black women’s economic challenges and tepid optimism about legislative remedies. Malveaux begins by expressing that in response to her germinal edited volume *Slipping Through the Cracks: The Status of Black Women* published in 1986, “it was exciting to see a new generation of researchers committed to examining the status of African American women.”²⁹ She also explains,

Their work did not necessarily replicate the research presented in the 1986 volume, though themes of disproportionality and intersectionality were carefully explored. Some of their research suggested that if Black women were slipping through the cracks in 1986, we are still slipping.³⁰

Despite the “still slipping” diagnosis, like Holder and Kenney et al., Malveaux sees the significant gains acquired by some Black women as signs of progress. Malveaux explains:

If high-profile African American women are considered, there has certainly been progress. Oprah Winfrey’s first national program was aired in September 1986; now she is a national phenomenon with her own television network. There were no African American women who led Fortune 500 corporations until 2009 when Xerox’s Ursula Burns assumed the helm at Xerox as Chairman and CEO. First lady Michelle Obama has brought enormous visibility to nutrition, children, and a host of other issues, using her visibility as the first African American First Lady of the United States. Donna Brazile, once a political operative, has evolved into a commentator and regular pres-

ence on CNN, as well as a seasoned political consultant and the Democratic National Committee's Vice Chair of Voter Registration. While African Americans were virtually invisible as national news anchors in 1986, today Suzanne Malveaux, Robin Roberts, Gayle King and others are a daily presence on national networks. Alexis Herman was the first African American woman to lead the Department of Labor (1996–2001), and Condoleezza Rice was the first to lead the State Department (2001–2005). The years since 1986 have been exciting times from the perspective of the individual achievements of African American women.³¹

Holder classifies the “gains” made by Black women as reflective of a “gender-diversifying of the U.S. workforce” and as “significant advances in the labor market,” and Malveaux’s remarks above reflects this tone. Malveaux even asserts that “The years since 1986 have been exciting times from the perspective of the individual achievements of African American women.”³² The accomplishments of these women are absolutely something to be praised and excited about—they are outstanding. However, when considering the CRC’s assertion that despite the marginalization of Black women in the workforce, “some of us are temporarily viewed as doubly desirable tokens at white-collar and professional levels”³³—uncritically classifying the accomplishments of these elite women as representations of racial “progress” becomes much more difficult. Many of these gains are surely the result of diversity-and-inclusion practices that have allowed for more visibility and opportunity to be afforded to some Black women who have acquired substantial amounts of financial, social, and political capital over the years. However, their positions do not reflect a shift in disparities between even these highly accomplished Black women and their contemporaries from other racial or gender demographics. How then, are we defining progress? Even the metaphor of “slipping through the cracks” is insufficient to addressing the problems of economic disparities because it obscures the fact that a system created and that is continually protecting a white cis-hetero-capitalist order *creates* cracks to forcibly push Black women into.

Some of specific “cracks” Malveaux outlines are economic opportunities eroded by the great recession, sexist pay gaps, and race-neutral public policy. She writes,

Additionally and parenthetically, African American women and men have a smaller pay gap through government employment than through private sector employment. State and local governments laid off at least 142,000 workers in 2011 (Williams 2011). Again, a disproportionate number of these were African American women. Many would argue that pay freezes and payroll cuts are economic necessity, not racially motivated, but all too often race-neutral public policy has a disproportionate racial impact.³⁴

Malveaux’s remarks lend themselves to the notion that race-neutral advantages will always improve Black women’s lives last compared to other groups. Furthermore, seemingly race-neutral disadvantages (like the 2008 economic recession and the more recent economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic) will always negatively impact Black women’s lives the most because of their already precarious social and economic status.³⁵

Like Oliver and Shapiro and Kenney et al., Malveaux offers cautiously optimistic assessments of legislative correctives to address the fact that in 2010, Black women—often the breadwinners in the Black community—have an average net worth of \$5. The \$5 net worth is starkly different from the status of single white women who have an average net worth of \$42,600. Malveaux explains that

The employment situation for African American women is compounded by the pay gap that these women experience. African American women earn 85 cents for every dollar earned by white women, and 63 cents for every dollar earned by white men ... While we are regularly reminded of the narrowing pay gap between men and women (with women currently earning 77 cents for every dollar men earn), and President Obama's Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act (2008) addresses some ways to close the gap, the pay gap that African American women experience is rarely addressed.³⁶

Malveaux's articulation of Black women's status begs a couple of questions. If, in 2010 the wealth gap between Black women and white women is approximately \$40,000—are calls for progress and equality based on economic enfranchisement really what Black women ought to be calling for? Also, given the roots of our present economically capitalistic ethnoclass, which necessitates an exploitable underclass, might it be time to reconsider the parameters of our measures of progress? Furthermore, as far as economists are concerned, might it also be time to reconsider of the parameters of the causes of these problems? For example, in her essay, Malveaux attempts to provide some context and reasons why Black women have *still* been “slipping through the cracks” and again, morality rears its head. Malveaux credits mass media as one culprit. She writes,

Perhaps public policy has ignored African American women so systematically because popular culture and the popular media have tended to demonize African American women as dependent welfare mothers, lewd, lascivious and sexually available women, and as unattractive, evil, neck-rolling and emasculating women. Given these stereotypes, Black women may be seen as less worthy of public policy attention.³⁷

While it is certainly true that popular culture and media have perpetuated the demonization of African American women, these factors—like wealth and health disparities—are chicken-and-egg symptoms of a larger more deeply rooted set of problems, not the cause. Furthermore, crediting public perception in a foregrounded way suggests that white people changing their minds about Black people would change public policy and make everything and everyone “equal.” Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham outlined these strategies implemented historically by Black women as a “politics of respectability” and while it yields some gains/protections for some Black women some of the time, it does not guarantee the eradication of, or even large-scale reduction of, wealth or health disparities experienced by Black women.

Interestingly, in an effort to connect Black American women's economic status to the status of other women around the African diaspora, Malveaux emphasizes the privileges and responsibility that Black women in the United States have to their presumed sistren. Malveaux asserts that,

Black women in the United States, despite many challenges, have a privileged position when compared to women in the developing world. From that perspective it is important that our policy work include advocacy for economic justice for women around the globe, and especially in the diasporic world.³⁸

While the intent of Malveaux's argument is encouraging, the implied logic of Malveaux's argument is quite troubling. According to Malveaux—and the way that she is measuring progress and inclusion—as Black women attempt to work within the confines of a capitalist American system, clawing their way to “equality”—it is also their responsibility to use their *relative* privileges to also advocate for the equality of women of color in other nations as well. Her argu-

ment is an obvious nod to and extension of Du Bois' conception of "the talented tenth." Her arguments also highlight the fact that that privilege of American Black women is precisely because they happen to be in America. Put differently, Black American women's experiences are more "privileged" than their global counterparts as a result of the US status as an imperialist global superpower and the inclusion of some Black women into the narrative of American progress and exceptionalism. This position necessitates their responsibility as advocates for the "freedom"—tied to economic equality—of other diasporic women. In the next section, I turn to Sylvia Wynter to explain some of the dangers of Malveaux's logic and the limitations it presents for the overall improvement of not just the status of Black women, but also our species more generally.

50.3 Zooming out: CRC and Sylvia Wynter diagnose the "real" cracks

The main problem with Holder, Kenney et al., Oliver, and Shapiro is that their diagnoses of Black women's economic situations and their assessments of remedies are not comprehensive enough. As a result, they characterize many symptoms of Black women's economic disenfranchisements as the roots of the problems they outline. For example, Holder credits Black women's lack of marriage as the root of their economic problems, as do Kenney et al., following "the economic theory of fertility and marriage." Malveaux claims that mass media enhanced distortions of Black women's images are the root of the problem and similarly Oliver and Shapiro—while not talking directly about Black women or directly about mass media—also cite discrimination at the main hindrance of Black wealth acquisition. According to Oliver and Shapiro,

[Discriminatory] policies are not the result of the workings of the free market or the demands of modern industrial society; they are, rather, a function of the political power of elites. The powerful protect and extend their interests by way of discriminatory laws and social policies, while minorities unite to contest them. Black political mobilization has removed barriers to Black economic security, but the process is uneven. As Blacks take one step forward, new and more intransigent legislative or judicial decisions push them back two steps.³⁹

Their argument that the US's discriminatory policies—such as Jim Crow laws and FHA housing policies from slavery to the present—are not a result of the workings of the free market or the demands of modern industrial society is—according to the Combahee River Collective completely incorrect. As the CRC asserts,

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe the work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist Revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist Revolution will guarantee our liberation.⁴⁰

Oliver and Shapiro argue that Black political mobilization has removed barriers to economic security, without confronting the fact that the free market and the demands of the modern industrial society is itself the central barrier to Black political mobilization. By contrast, the Combahee River Collective recognized that Black political mobilization that did not attend

the problems that a capitalistic system presented (in addition to the ways in which it creates and exacerbates gender and racial oppression), would only ever yield partial gains—or as Oliver and Shapiro call it “uneven” Black political mobilization.

To conclude, given the dangers of what it would actually mean if Black people held the same opportunities for wealth that whites or Asians hold,⁴¹ or if Black women across the diaspora were as “privileged” as Black women in America, again, I ask question whether it is time to rethink our measures of progress, equality, and freedom. The larger implications of everyone attaining “freedom” in what Sylvia Wynter characterizes as “the overall globally incorporated world-systemic capitalist economic order in its now neoliberal and neo-imperial, homo-oecomicus bourgeois ruling-class configuration at a world-systemic level—of which the United States is still its superpower hegemon”⁴² would be utterly disastrous, ecologically speaking. Wynter, among other things, credits the global free market economy for the insanely unequal distribution of material resources across the globe. According to Wynter, within the overall globally incorporated world-systemic capitalist economic order,⁴³ there is no hope for justice or balance. Rather than looking to improve a global economic system that is crippling to the ecosystem, instead Wynter, drawing on Gerald Barney, asks us to think much more comprehensively. She writes,

What at once becomes clear is this: rather than positing that “we humans have a poverty problem, or a habitat problem, or an energy problem, or a trade problem, or a population problem, or an atmosphere problem, or a waste problem or a resource problem,” these, on a planetary scale, are understood, together, as “inter-connected problems.” Thus, thinking globally, what “we really have is a poverty-hunger-habitat-at-energy-trade-population-atmosphere-waste-resource problem,” none of whose separate parts can be solved on their own. They all interact and are interconnected and thus, together, are constitutive of our species’ now seemingly inescapable, hitherto unresolvable “global problematique.”⁴⁴

I’m asking us to operationalize Wynter’s call to think ecologically and globally, and thusly much more comprehensively. This more comprehensive thinking disallows much of the symptomatic misdiagnoses and miseducation that plague economists’ perspectives about Black women’s economic lives that I have highlighted throughout this piece. In their inability to consider the impossibility of Black women’s freedom (understood as Black women’s economic prosperity) within the free market or global capitalism, their analyses remain uneven and miss intersectionality’s core critical purpose that the Combahee River Collective outlined in 1977. What remains to be seen is whether or not increasing concern over the environment might finally force economists—especially economists, policymakers, and advocates of Black economic justice—to reassess their measures of progress, economic “equality,” futurity, and freedom for us all.

Notes

- 1 Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, January 1, 1989, 139–67.
- 2 The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement.” *Words of Fire*. New York: The New Press. 1995, 232.
- 3 CRC, 232.
- 4 CRC, 234.

- 5 Keeping in mind that “interlocking oppression” functioned as an earlier visualization of Black women’s experiences that has been functionality eclipse and/or has given rise to the prominence of “intersectionality” as the predominant metaphor for theorizing Black women’s relationship to power in critical discourse.
- 6 CRC, 237.
- 7 Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth*. New York: Routledge. 1995, 174.
- 8 Mayol-García, Gurrentz, and Kreider, “Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 2016.”
- 9 US Census Bureau, “Poverty Rate of Black Married-Couple Families in the U.S. from 1990 to 2020.”
- 10 US Census Bureau, “Poverty Rate of Black Families with a Single Mother in the United States 1990 to 2020.”
- 11 Bhutta et al., “Disparities in Wealth by Race and Ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances.”
- 12 CRC, 235.
- 13 Michelle Holder, “Introduction to Articles on Black Women and Work.” *Review Black Political Economy* (2013) 40, 25.
- 14 Holder, 25.
- 15 Holder, 25.
- 16 CRC, 235.
- 17 Holder, 25.
- 18 Nicole Kenney et al., “The Invisible Woman: The Status of and Challenges Facing Black Women.” *Review Black Political Economy* (2013) 40, 6.
- 19 Kenney et al., 6.
- 20 Mayol-García, Gurrentz, and Kreider, “Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 2016.”
- 21 Holder, 25.
- 22 Kenney et al., 7.
- 23 Kenney et al., 8.
- 24 Kenney et al., 8.
- 25 Kenney et al., 8.
- 26 Kenney et al., 8.
- 27 Kenney et al., 9.
- 28 Kenney et al., 10.
- 29 Julianne Malveaux, “Still Slipping: African-American Women in the Economy and in Society.” *Rev Black Political Economy* (2013) 40, 14.
- 30 Malveaux, 14.
- 31 Malveaux, 14.
- 32 Malveaux, 14.
- 33 CRC, 235.
- 34 Malveaux, 15.
- 35 “Wealth Matters.”
- 36 Malveaux, 16.
- 37 Malveaux, 18.
- 38 Malveaux, 19.
- 39 Oliver and Shapiro, 174.
- 40 CRC, 235.
- 41 Bureau and Creamer, “Inequalities Persist Despite Decline in Poverty for All Major Race and Hispanic Origin Groups.”
- 42 Katherine McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2011, 26
- 43 McKittrick, 26.
- 44 McKittrick, 44.

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#METOO, INTERSECTIONALITY, LAW

*Brenda Cossman*¹

#MeToo has an intersectionality problem. Scholars and activists alike have called out its failure to include Black and other women of color, and its inattention to racism and other structures of oppression. Almost immediately following Alyssa Milano's viral #MeToo tweet,² Black feminists rushed to point out that Tarana Burke had actually created the MeToo movement in 2005 for survivors of sexual violence, focusing in particular on young women of color.³ While Burke was given credit, she was repeatedly sidelined as mainstream and social media focused on celebrity and predominantly white victims, with many noting her conspicuous absence from the *Time Magazine* cover in October 2017 naming the "Silence Breakers" as People of the Year. Others have pointed out the absence of Black and other woman of color from participation in the viral #MeToo sensation.⁴ Burke herself repeatedly spoke out about the focus on celebrity and the sidelining of women of color. Not only did Black women not participate in the hashtag—Jamillah Bowman Williams has revealed that less than 1 percent of the tweets with the #MeToo hashtag were identifiable to a Black participant—but that they were also excluded from offline #MeToo activity.⁵ While some pointed out the centering of white women's pain,⁶ others tied the exclusion to racialized narratives of Black women's aberrant sexuality.⁷ Others pointed to the historic reasons that Black women might not want to participate in a dynamic that has resulted in the mass incarceration of Black men.⁸ Many others have picked up on the critique of mass incarceration, warning #MeToo against reliance on the criminal justice system, highlighting the violence that Black women and men experience at the state's hands.⁹

Indeed, it would seem that #MeToo has many intersectionality problems, that differently coming into view depending on how the analytic is understood. The intersectional problems range from individual omissions to collective exclusions to racialized state violence. Despite, or perhaps because of, intersectionality's "citational ubiquity,"¹⁰ many critiques reside under its sign. Building on these critiques, I am interested in the less explored question of intersectionality's "juridical project"¹¹ and its implications for #MeToo. Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in the context of a critical analysis of law; indeed, her second article "Mapping the Margins" turned her intersectional legal critique specifically to violence against women of color.¹² Intersectionality has exploded well beyond legal roots, coming to signify the complex interlocking nature of oppressions of race, gender, class and beyond, deeply equated with Black feminism and the unique location/oppression of women of color. As Jennifer Nash has argued, its legal roots have been all but forgotten, at times "swept into a

larger Black feminist conversation that presumes the violence of the juridical.”¹³ Nash argues that Black feminists should revisit law as “a crucial site of the analytic’s transformative potential.”¹⁴ Critical race theorists like Crenshaw never saw intersectionality as simply about the inclusion of Black women in law; rather, it was part of a broader effort “to radically remake law.”¹⁵ Intersectionality is analytic “an analytic that radically occupies law, takes hold of legal doctrine and refuses its conceptions of neutrality and uniformity as performative of justice.” It is, she argues, “a strategy of demanding that law move otherwise, that it center witnessing and vulnerability, that it encourages forms of relationality and accountability that jettison logics of contract and property.” For Nash, intersectionality’s “juridical project” is “the very heart of its radical political agenda.”¹⁶

Thinking alongside Nash, I am interested in exploring the implications of an intersectional analytic for #MeToo’s juridical project, and for the potential to remake law around sexual violence. What might intersectionality’s radical juridical project tell us about sexual violence up to, including and after #MeToo? #MeToo did not emerge as a movement with a legal agenda; it was rather as I have argued, a performance of the spectacular failure of law to prevent sexual violence. Yet, this failure has led many to call on law to do better. In some quarters, this is a call for the criminal justice system. In others, an improvement to Title IX or other civil remedies for sexual harassment and violence. It is a call for improvement in legal processes to include more victims, and to punish more offenders.

But, if we return to the Crenshaw origin story, intersectionality was never simply an inclusion project. In “Mapping the Margins” Crenshaw’s analysis structural, political, and representational intersectionalities was designed to illustrate the marginalization of violence against Black women in both anti-racist and feminist discourses. She warned, amongst other things, of the intersectional challenges of the racialized history sexual violence, in which rape allegations were long used to discipline, criminalize, and kill Black men. She warned too of feminist anti-violence activism that sought to strengthen the criminal justice system. The continuing legacy of criminalizing Black men, pointing for example to the Central Park Five (years before exoneration), would make it political unviable for Black women to turn to a deeply racist criminal justice. Intersectionality was not about including more Black women as victims in the criminal justice system; it was about redressing the racial stratification of that system.

Much has been written in the intervening years on feminism’s turn to the criminal justice system, which later would be labeled “carceral feminism,” and on the deeply racist nature of mass incarceration. Over 20 years ago, Beth Richie wrote: “For over a decade, women of color in the anti-violence movement have warned against investing too heavily in arrest, detention, and prosecution as responses to violence against women.” The past two decades have seen a growing critique of the criminal justice system, the exponential growth of prisons since the 1980s, and prison populations made up disproportionately of people of color. Scholars, activists, journalists and filmmakers have tracked the rise of mass incarceration and its devastating impact on Black communities.¹⁷ From Michelle Alexander’s best-selling *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) to Ava DuVernay’s award winning documentary *The 13th* (2016), alongside the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, the critique of mass incarceration is driving a growing progressive consensus that the United States incarcerates too many people, and that too many of them are Black. The critique has been led by Black feminists: Angela Davis, Beth Richie, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore are among the Black feminist activists and scholars who have highlighted the devastating differential impact of mass incarceration on Black people. While they have joined issue with the prison abolition movement, they insist that attention be addressed to sexual violence, something often missing within the broader movement. In 2001, *Incite!* and *Critical Resistance* came together to articulate the failings of the prison

abolition movement and the feminist anti-violence movement in their “Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex:”

We share the feelings of outrage experienced by rape victims; we believe that repetitive rapists must be restrained from committing further acts of violence. On the other hand, we do not support the response of imprisonment. We challenge the basic assumptions that punishment, harsh sentences and retributive attitudes will serve to lessen victims’ pain, re-educate rapists or genuinely protect society.¹⁸

Beth Richie has revealed the negative effect of criminalizing and incarcerating racialized survivors of gender-based violence, focusing on the plight of Black women, socially marginalized through structural racism and economic inequality, left susceptible to both male violence and state incarceration.¹⁹ In 2013, Angela Davis gave this movement a name—abolition feminism.²⁰

Thirty years after Crenshaw wrote “Mapping the Margins,” there is an increasing, though at best partial, recognition of the intersectional problem of sexual violence *and* state violence against Black women. In the aftermath of #MeToo, while many feminists called for stricter criminal sanctions against sexual offenders, a few voices could now be heard warning against a turn to the carceral.²¹ Judith Levine argued that the #MeToo movement must “resist the thrill of Jacobin purges,” pointing out that “the *longue durée* of mass incarceration and punitive surveillance teaches us that state violence is no answer to interpersonal violence.” Levine and Meiner have described the current post #MeToo moment as “one problem, two faces: sexual harm and state violence,” where the second problem of state violence is partially the result of the state’s solution to the first problem. Alison Phipps has pointed out the political whiteness of the #MeToo movement, and speaking directly to white feminists, argues that an intersectional analysis demands a resistance to the expansion of the carceral, and the adoption of an abolitionist politics.²² These feminist voices are seeking to have the possibilities opened by #MeToo join issue with Black feminist abolitionists who have long been espousing attention to these intersections of sexual violence and state violence.

But what does resisting the allure of “Jacobin purges” and resort to the carceral state mean for the regulation of sexual violence? And what might intersectionality’s radical juridical project tell us? Some anti-carceral and abolition feminists reject engaging with the state tout court; seeing feminist law reform as *de facto* carceral, endorsing instead only those projects independent of the law and the state.²³ But an abolitionist framework need not involve a repudiation of the juridical. Anna Terwiel, for example, argues for an expansive feminist abolition politics that eschews the carceral/anti-carceral binary and, by extension engaging/not engaging the state.²⁴ She advocates instead a spectrum of decarceration, arguing that the question should not be whether to engage with the state, but rather, how to do so in ways that advance decarceration. Indeed, many prison abolitionists support law reform.²⁵ While advocates of abolishing the penal system distinguish their position from reformism, they do support law reforms that move towards abolition. Critical Resistance and other similar organizations champion reforms that advance abolishing the prison industrial complex, such as eliminating the death penalty, decriminalization, shorter prison sentences, improved parole directed at decreasing recidivism, supporting prisoners’ rights to organize politically, and doing away with mandatory minimum sentences. With eliminating prison altogether as the ultimate goal, the question defining strategies is whether reforms are directed at “fixing” the system, or decreasing its footprint.

Intersectionality’s radical juridical project could lead us to a consideration of inhabiting law differently. Building on the work of Eve Sedgwick, I have argued for a reparative approach in which the harms of sexual violence must be read beside the harms of criminalization in particu-

lar, and regulation more generally.²⁶ Reading these harms *beside* as opposed to against each other, requires that we keep both sets of harms in view simultaneously, in order to continuously grapple with their intersections. An intersectional critique of sexual violence requires a rethinking of modalities of regulation, imagining that the juridical project can be otherwise. First, in taking the harms of state violence seriously, it demands a step back from the criminal justice system. It need not eschew all reforms; but it must reimagine law through a lens of decarceration. Beyond a move away from criminal law, it is a move away from the carceral logics that inform regulation and casts a disciplinary and punitive surveillance over vulnerable populations.²⁷ The criminal justice system is one predicated on punishment; it is a form of retributive justice, where wrongdoers are punished. In the criminal justice system, the punishment is carceral. But, the desire for punishment is one that has extended well beyond the criminal justice system. A similar desire for retribution involves much of the way we think about non-criminal approaches to sexual violence. In the context of campus sexual violence, and the debates over the Title IX, the demands have often been for increased forms of punishment, including expulsion.²⁸

Intersectionality's radical juridical project, in the context of sexual violence, is not an abdication of responsibility and accountability for harms. It is, rather, a plea to reimagine what that might look like outside the punitive regime of mass incarceration. Abolition feminists have long been on the front line developing transformative models of justice to address sexual harm from outside of the criminal justice system. Others have looked to alternative justice modalities that supplement the criminal justice system, advancing restorative, transitional and/or reparative models. These models offer possibilities for reimagining the regulation of sexual harm. Restorative justice, for example, is a process that seeks to bring together all the stakeholders affected by a harm, giving them an opportunity to voice their harm, and consider how the harm can be repaired.²⁹ It focuses on holding offenders responsible by directly addressing those who have been harmed. Restorative justice has been deployed at a number of sites on the spectrum of decarceration, as both supplements and alternatives to the criminal justice system. In its various deployments, restorative justice is intended to move beyond the limitations of a criminal justice system by promoting offender accountability, victim reparation and reintegration. Restorative justice has attracted considerable feminist attention exploring its potential for redressing sexual harms. Scholars have considered ways in which a restorative approach that focuses on voice and validation may better address the needs of victims and promote offender accountability. Laurie Kohn, for example, has argued that is a process uniquely suited to the needs of victims of sexual violence:

[T]he offender has to face the victim and take responsibility for his or her actions that caused harm. The process gives victims back some of the power they lost during the sexual misconduct by allowing them to confront those who wronged them and participate in the process. Restorative justice is uniquely poised to invite and host a conversation about the critical question, "why?"³⁰

Restorative justice is a process with considerable decarceral potential, decentering the role of the criminal justice system and its reliance on punishment and incarceration. But it is also a process that can be deployed to decenter carceral logics of retribution and punishment in civil and administrative contexts, such as Title VII and Title IX.

Transformative justice builds on many of the principles of restorative justice but broadens the inquiry to consider the social factors that produces harmful behavior. It is an approach that rejects the carceral state, and attempts to develop models of accountability within communities. Transformative justice is a model that has grown out of grassroots movements, led by Black and

other communities of color, often associated with abolition politics. In the context of sexual violence, transformative justice seeks to address not only individual and community harms, but also the very structural inequalities that give rise to sexual violence. Generation Five defines transformative justice as a “liberatory approach to violence ... [that] seeks safety and accountability without relying on alienation, punishment, or state or systemic violence, including incarceration or police.”³¹ While advocates of transformative justice often herald the leadership work of INCITE! that has developed “community-based alternative responses to addressing domestic and sexual violence so that survivors are not forced to rely on police and prisons,”³² there has been a proliferation of organizations and resources on developing community based accountability strategies.³³ Transformative justice strategies seek to build community capacity, develop safety strategies, support healing, hold accountability and transform local communities.³⁴

These alternative models of accountability, breaking with the punitive and retributive models of the carceral state and mass incarceration, as well as the carceral logics of more civil processes, gesture towards a more radical juridical project. Nash suggests that we revision law around an “ethics of mutual vulnerability and witnessing.”³⁵ These models of transformative and restorative justice offer glimpses of just such an ethics. Harm can be witnessed, and accountability for those harms, can be imagined in ways that recognize the deep interdependencies, intimacies, and vulnerabilities between and among individuals and communities. Indeed, decades of advocacy, activism, and scholarship has amply demonstrated that sexual violence against women cannot even begin to be redressed, to say nothing of prevention, without centering these interdependencies, intimacies, and vulnerabilities.

#MeToo began as a kind of collective giving voice to the pervasiveness of sexual violence, albeit one with an intersectional problem of whose voice was included, centered, and amplified. Giving voice did not presuppose any particular legal outcome or modes of accountability. But, it was a giving voice that was all too easily assimilated into hegemonic frames of accountability: harms require legal redress; and serious harms require criminal redress. #MeToo’s performance of widespread sexual violence in fact gave rise to a range of alternative modes of accountability, from the board room to the #ShittyMensList. This circumventing of traditional legal avenues of accountability for sexual harms was itself controversial, leading to accusations of the death of due process and trial by media fire. Indeed, as I have argued, these controversies were symptomatic of the very hegemonic power of law: criminal law alone has the power to define and adjudicate sexual harm.³⁶ #MeToo’s intersectionality problems were cumulative. Giving voice to only some harms in turn framed the nature of the harm as exclusively one of sexual violence, not state violence. And the focus on these aggregated individual sexual harms did little to displace the hegemonic framing of the criminal law as the solution. Intersectionality is not simply a demand for a more inclusive giving voice – although it is of course that too. Rather, a more inclusive giving voice—and listening to those voices—in turn demands a reframing of the very nature of the harms, of the meaning of accountability and the understanding of healing.

#MeToo’s intersectionality problems are not only a story of different feminist genealogies—white and Black, carceral and abolitionist, celebrity and grassroots. These different feminist genealogies are also a story of two MeToo’s—the mainstream viral #MeToo and Tarana Burke’s MeToo. While the hashtag #MeToo was all too easily assimilated into a hegemonic narrative of carceral accountability, Burke’s MeToo never was. Burke’s MeToo is about survivors and healing; it is about centering the experience of young Black and women of color, struggling with trauma and the multiple inequalities that produced it. The movement focuses on individual and community healing and transformation, “empowerment through empathy,” and building a survivor led movement to end sexual violence. It weaves together elements of restorative and transformative approaches, as well as distinctively healing justice approaches.³⁷ Burke’s MeToo

does not eschew law, nor does it center it. She describes herself as an abolitionist, yet insists on a pragmatic approach to survivors, meeting them where they are, and supporting them in their own journey.³⁸ Her MeToo is one that dreams of alternative models of accountability, while not abandoning survivors who may still want to pursue complaints within the existing system. But regardless of the path that survivors take, Burke insists that healing is also about cultivating joy: “I want to teach people to not lean into their trauma. You can create the kind of joy in your life that allows you to lean into that instead.”³⁹ We must, she argues, “figure out how to curate joy in our own lives.”⁴⁰

Burke’s MeToo gestures toward intersectionality’s radical juridical project. We might try to reimagine law through the lens of healing, accountability, and even joy. What forms of relationality and accountability might be possible if we considered the cultivation of joy? Law is not a very joyful place. But what if we imagined law as reparative rather than retributive? Such a radical revisioning of law could help displace punishment and retribution in favor of more healing and the promotion of positive affect. Transformational justice and abolition feminism understandably reject resort to the state and to the juridical, advancing alternative community-based modalities of relationality. I nevertheless come back to law, partially because it is what I know, and partially because law has a role to play in decarceration. We need law to get to less criminal law. But, I am also inspired by the queer futurity of Jose Estaban Munoz, who has argued that queerness is an aspiration toward the future; it is “a horizon imbued with potentiality.”⁴¹ Queerness is about imagining better possibilities, “an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.”⁴² I return to law with this call for hopefulness to imagine new ways of belonging, as a way to allow us, as Munoz says, “to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.”⁴³ It might well be born of a cruel optimism,⁴⁴ yet I believe it possible to reimagine law as a set of rules and aspirations to guide relationality, and promote accountability when we fall short. We need not abandon entirely the possibilities of legal regulation of sexual violence to commit to disentangling such regulation from all its carceral moorings, including the logics of punishment and retribution. Intersectionality’s radical juridical project requires that we keep both sexual violence and state violence sharply in view, not only in assessing each and every concrete legal reform, but as part of a guiding light toward a futurity of imagining law otherwise.

Notes

- 1 This article draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
- 2 On October 15, 2017, Alyssa Milano tweeted “If you have been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” @Alyssa_Milano, 4:21 p.m., October 15, 2017.
- 3 www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html.
- 4 Gina Beavers “#MeToo? Black Women on the Periphery of a Movement,” *Valley Advocate*, January 31, 2018.
- 5 Jamillah Bowman Williams “Maximizing #MeToo: Intersectionality and the Movement,” *B.C.L. Rev.* 62 (2021), 1797.
- 6 Ashwini Tambe. “Reckoning with the Silences of MeToo,” *Feminist Studies* 44 (2018), 197; Vrushali Patil and Jyoti Puri ““Colorblind Feminisms’: Ansari-Grace and the Limits of #MeToo Counterpublics,” *Signs*, 46(3) (2021), 689.
- 7 Leung and Williams “#MeToo and Intersectionality: An Examination of the #MeToo Movement through the R. Kelly Scandal,” *J. Comm. Inquiry* 43 (2019), 349.
- 8 Ashwini Tambe, “Reckoning with the Silences of MeToo,” writes at 200:

“This is already too familiar a problem for black men. We know the history of how black men have been lynched based on unfounded allegations that they sexually violated white women. We know how many black men are unjustly incarcerated. The dynamics of #MeToo, in which due process has been reversed—with accusers’ words taken more seriously than those of the accused—is a familiar problem in black communities. Maybe some black women want no part of this dynamic.”

- 9 Aliza Palto “Your Feminism isn’t Intersectional if it Does Include Prison Abolition,” *Bust*, July 2020; Alex Press “MeToo must avoid “carceral feminism” www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2018/2/1/16952744/me-too-larry-nassar-judge-aquilina-feminism; Judith Levine and Erica Meiners *The Feminist and the Sex Offender* (Verso, 2020); Margo Kaplan “Reconciling #MeToo and Criminal Justice,” *Ohio St. J. Crim. L.*, 17 (2020), 361; Alison Phipps *Me Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism* (Manchester, 2020); Aya Gruber “#MeToo and Mass Incarceration,” *Ohio St. J. Crim. L.*, 17 (2020), 17; Guy Hamilton-Smith “The Agony and the Ecstasy of #MeToo: The Hidden Cost of Reliance on Carceral Politics” *SW. L. Rev.*, 49 (2020), 93.
- 10 Jennifer Nash *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Duke University Press, 2019), 3.
- 11 Nash, *Black Feminism*.
- 12 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): 139–40; “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43(6) (1991): 1241.
- 13 Nash, *Black Feminism*, 121.
- 14 Nash, *Black Feminism*, 129.
- 15 Nash *Black Feminism*, 123.
- 16 Nash, *Black Feminism*, 123.
- 17 Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); Beth Richie and Ruth Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley, London, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).
- 18 Critical Resistance and INCITE!, “Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison-Industrial Complex,” *Social Justice* 30, no. 3 (2003): 141–150.
- 19 Beth Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence and American’s Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
- 20 Angela Davis, “Feminism and Abolition: Theories and Practices for the Twenty First Century,” May 2013, University of Chicago, available on YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKb99K3AEaA.
- 21 See *supra* at note 8.
- 22 Alison Phipps *Me, Not You: The Trouble with Mainstream Feminism*.
- 23 Chloë Taylor, “Anti-Carceral Feminism and Sexual Assault—A Defense. A Critique of the Critique of the Critique of Carceral Feminism,” *Social Philosophy Today* 34 (2018): 29–49.
- 24 Anna Terwiel, “What Is Carceral Feminism?” *Political Theory* 48, no. 4 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591719889946>.
- 25 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, quoted in Rachel Kushner, “Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2019, www.nytimes.com. This is not to say that Gilmore and other abolitionists are opposed to all reforms: “It’s obvious that the system won’t disappear overnight,” Gilmore has said. “No abolitionist thinks that will be the case.”
- 26 Eve Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You,” *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003); Brenda Cossman, *The New Sex Wars: Sexual Harm in the #MeToo Era* (New York University Press, 2021).
- 27 Dorothy Roberts, “Abolition Constitutionalism,” *Harvard Law Review* 133 (2019), 1.
- 28 See for example Janet Halley, “The Move to Affirmative Consent,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42 (2016): 257.
- 29 John Braithwaite, “Restorative Justice and De-Professionalization,” *The Good Society* 13, no. 1 (2004): 28.
- 30 Laurie Kohn, “#MeToo, Wrongs against Women, and Restorative Justice,” 28 *Kan. J. L. Pub. Pol’y* 28 (2019), 561.
- 31 Generation Five *Toward Transformative Justice: A Liberatory Approach to Child Sexual Abuse and other forms of Intimate and Community Violence* (June 2007) www.usprisonculture.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/G5_Toward_Transformative_Justice.pdf.
- 32 INCITE!, “About: Principles of Unity,” <https://incite-national.org/principles-of-unity/>, accessed August 1, 2020.
- 33 See for example Mariame Kaba *Fumbling Towards Repair*, and *We Do This Til We Free Us*. Kaba founded Project NIA which seeks to end the criminalization of children and young adults by promoting restorative and transformative justice practices. <https://project-nia.org>.

The Justice Practice Collaborative is “a training and mentoring group focused on sustaining a community of practitioners that provide community-based accountability and support structures for all parties involved with incidents and patterns of sexual, domestic, relationship, and intimate community violence.”

- 34 See for example, Generation Five *Toward Transformative Justice* (2007). www.generationfive.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/G5_Toward_Transformative_Justice-Document.pdf.
- 35 Nash, *Black Feminism*, a130.
- 36 Cossman, *The New Sex Wars*.
- 37 Cara Page and Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective describe the work of healing justice as intervening, interrupting and transforming generation trauma: “healing justice ... identifies how we can holistically respond to and intervene on generational trauma and violence, and to bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts and minds” (as cited at Healing by Choice website www.healingbychoicedetroit.com/what-is-healing-justice).
- 38 Tarana Burke, “On #MeToo Anniversary, Tarana Burke Talks About the Modern Movement's Impact, Restorative Justice, and Aziz Ansari,” *Teen Vogue*, October 15, 2019. “So I’m not going to try to impose my views and values on a survivor who is trying to just find a nugget. And if that nugget is, ‘I’m going to get this rape kit done, I’m going to prosecute, I’m going to whatever,’ I can educate about alternatives and other things, but it is not my position to tell you that this is what justice should look like for you. That’s just not my role, right? And I won’t take that role.” www.teenvogue.com/story/metoo-anniversary-tarana-burke.
- 39 Tarana Burke, quoted in Aisha Harris, “She Founded Me Too. Now She Wants to Move Past the Trauma,” *The New York Times*, October 15, 2018.
- 40 Kenya Anderson, “#MeToo Founder Tarana Burke on Working Through Trauma to Create Joy,” *Vice*, September 11, 2018.
- 41 Jose Estaban Munoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 1.
- 42 Munoz, 1
- 43 Munoz, 1.
- 44 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011).

RETHINKING CONCEPTS OF CARE AND LABOR AS AN INTERSECTIONAL POLITICS OF REDISTRIBUTION

Valerie Taing

52.1 Introduction

US feminist labor studies often deploy concepts of care work as a strategy to overcome the cultural and political devaluation of gendered labor. While concepts of care work vary in their description, they generally aim to describe the types of labor and activity associated with the daily maintenance and development of people and relationships—according to who is being cared for, whether it is waged or unwaged, the types of relations and intimacies present, and the settings where it is performed. In these definitions, care work encompasses social reproductive activities of hygiene, diapering, feeding, clothing, decorating, and cleaning; as the nurturant or emotional labor that goes into providing care and support (Glenn 1992; Hochschild 2012; Folbre 2001); and as a set of feminized occupational categories that describe service work in formalized settings of health care, education, and child care (Duffy et al. 2015). In emphasizing care as work, studies tend to treat the nature and content of the work as the object of study in ways that reify the structures that produce this labor’s devaluation. For instance, the strategy of establishing feminized labor as “skilled” work to achieve legibility and recognition tends to underscore this labor’s value in terms of its productive qualities and economic utility. It creates boundaries between skilled/unskilled labor that adapt to dominant cultural and legal symbols, meanings, and categories of work to justify resource distribution. As an analytic approach it invests in making a work-based identity visible over a deliberate interrogation of the processes that (re)produce the divisions of labor and hierarchies of value and worth that confer rights and resources according to work status. Thus, in focusing attention on care work as object, the structures and processes that organize systems of care provision and shape the distribution of this labor become obscured.

Feminist labor studies importantly contend with the role of laws and policies, but this recognition often focuses on the consequences of exclusionary labor laws for improving the status and working conditions of caregivers, rather than seeing labor struggles as also constitutive of the social welfare laws and policies that shape the goals and beneficiaries of care provision. In doing so, important opportunities to explore what that suggests for political possibilities, and what we might imagine for feminist practice and action are often missed. If we are invested in

the redistribution of resources required to collectively sustain care and caregiving, more analytic attention needs to be given to the structures and contexts that organize care work and shape its political meaning. This shift in orientation may help us to think more creatively about how we might shift responsibilities and burdens away from the people and communities disproportionately shouldering them. Intersectionality aids in bringing attention to the role and responsibilities of the welfare state—both its construction and maintenance of laws and policies, and as an ongoing set of processes that contest and negotiate the distribution of goods and services—and its benefits and burdens that are consequential to the organization of systems of care and caregiving.

I interpret labor struggles about, and over, care work as contestations that are embedded in the welfare state. By focusing on the process of claims-making within the field and context of systems of care provision, we can observe more closely how political and cultural contexts mediate and shape the (re)production of inequalities. We can investigate the ways laws and policies organizing care provision dynamically shape and are shaped by political meanings of care, enable different subjectivities, and the content and form labor struggles might take. Further, we can more openly consider what is gained and lost among these strategic choices and models for thinking about the goals and beneficiaries of care provision. I understand these processes as ongoing contestations and negotiations, by combining the analytic tools of social movements research and intersectionality as a strategy for analysis (Choo and Ferree 2010). This approach recognizes the complex, dynamic, and durable features of the political environment that structure institutional fields and shape the available meanings and forms that strategic action may take. Claims-making, as a context-dependent activity, becomes an entry point for illuminating the dynamic and contingent features of struggle, as well as the durable features of laws and policies that constrain action and what can be asked for.

This essay reflects my ambivalence toward concepts of care work and a desire for more attention to specifying the political and cultural processes that (re)produce inequalities in the distribution of recognition, resources, and rights according to work and work status. I draw inspiration from Kathi Weeks's utopian concept of *postwork futures*, observing that by centering work and work status as the justification for accessing resources, rights, and recognition, we limit conceptions of what is politically possible to not only secure "better work, but also the time and money necessary to have a life outside of work" (Weeks 2011, 13). In her postwork vision, Kathi Weeks challenges us to expand our political imagination for what might be, as a practice of freedom, if we allowed ourselves to question the dominance of work in our lives, the prevailing discourses shaping our understanding, and explore the creative political possibilities that could be generated outside the boundaries of work. This vision inspires us to identify alternative cultural symbols and meanings or utopian "fragments" that might reach beyond institutions of work and family and bring into being new subjectivities and forms of solidarity in the service of "getting a life" (Weeks 2011, 233). I am particularly interested in how to construct and ground alternative, more expansive, claims directed at the welfare state, by identifying the legal and cultural sources for constructing new subjectivities and notions of citizenship that might bring about class formations and alternative ways of orienting and organizing society. While claims-making often reflects a pragmatic response to material conditions; feminist theory has a role to play in broadening what, where, and how those claims might be grounded to expand our political imaginations of what can be. First, I briefly discuss how feminist labor studies situate care work in relation to laws and policies. I follow with presenting the case of US child care politics to describe how systems of social welfare provision mediate and shape the types of claims that can be made. Intersectionality recognizes how laws and policies construct meanings that shape our daily lives, and as a political and cultural resource and remedy. It is in this spirit, that I con-

sider this as one component of an analytic approach that can help us to understand the potential models available for claims-making that help imagine new class formations and solidarities.

52.2 *Feminist labor studies and the welfare state*

Existing intersectional approaches to care work recognize the institutional legacies and structures that subordinate and deny Black women and women of color, including immigrant women, from worker protections and citizenship. In a review of care work scholarship, Mary Romero and Nancy Pérez argue that “theorizing all women’s work as care work erases significant cultural and political structures that deny labor rights and limit access to citizenship,” and that “different categories of care work also highlight the importance of legal constraints to improving conditions” (Romero and Pérez 2016, 173–4). Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2012) discusses the historical and institutional legacies of slavery and settler colonialism in shaping the organization of home care work. Labor, welfare, and immigration laws construct the perceptions and conditions of this work, the beneficiaries of care provision, and how caregivers’ roles and responsibilities are understood in ways that relegate Black women and women of color to the lowest rung of occupational hierarchies (Glenn 2012). Boris and Klein (2006) draw attention to how home health care aides—a constituency constitutive of changes to health care, welfare, and labor laws—leveraged the law by collectively organizing as a workforce. While securing union representation conferred legitimacy and bargaining power, their pay remained inadequate (Boris and Klein 2006). The authors state: “home care workers gave up the status of ‘independent contractors’ in order to shake off the dependence of low-wage work that lacked the protections of labor law and the social recognition normally accorded to wage work in American society” (Boris and Klein 2006, 100). Labor-based accounts of struggles to bring status and recognition to feminized occupations consider what is gained in the political short-term for constituencies. They rarely consider what might be lost in the long-term for how we think about the organization of systems of family and home care and how resources are distributed, in this case. Or how changes in the perception of the work may reinforce hierarchies of value and worth that shape the distribution of resources that affect home-based caregivers who do not hold credentials or symbols of recognition, and thus remain unprotected and overlooked by existing laws. Though studies of care work recognize law as both constraint, remedy, and resource to be wielded in improving the material conditions of the women largely performing this labor, the possible sources of agency and processes by which law constitutes the form and content of these struggles is taken-for-granted or underspecified. Thus, studies tend to emphasize labor and work status as sources for exercising agency and rarely consider the ongoing field level processes by which inequalities and structures of domination are challenged, reified, and reproduced through labor struggles. These struggles are also sites of contestation over resources, autonomy, and recognition that make claims to value and worth that have consequences for the organization of care provision.

Through the case of child care politics in the US, I aim to show how care work is constituted by the laws and policies that shape its content and form. This approach seeks to shift attention to the role and responsibility of the welfare state in remedying inequalities in the distribution of resources. Observing and recognizing the processes underlying the reproduction of systems of hierarchy, value, and worth, can inform alternative models for thinking about care provision more broadly. Further, it recognizes the presence of multiple contingencies, political possibilities, and models for thinking about improving the material conditions of caregivers. I’m thus interested in how laws contribute to constructing contemporary meanings and political struggles around care and labor, and their implications for moving beyond a “politics of class outcomes” that emphasizes improving wages through achievement-oriented occupational and/

or class mobility (Weeks 2011, 19). Intersectionality as an analytic offers a way to bring attention to the structures and cultural meanings—laws, categories, and symbols that confer rights, recognition, and resources.

52.3 Sources of claims-making in US child care politics

In the context of the delegated welfare state, cultural ideas about the role and goals of child care are unevenly institutionalized into laws and policies. The political meanings of child care provision and its goals are reshaped and contested at the field level among a range of actors that carry their own logics about how and where resources should be distributed that have implications for which forms of care are valued and what resources (and expectations) are granted according to categories of care or types of caregivers. In my research, I trace the available logics for constituting the political identities of caregivers that are embedded in existing laws and policies that confer different rights and protections, and shape how caregivers may understand their goals and interests. Logics of mothering and education are among the predominant institutional logics organizing models of US child care provision. These logics shape the types of claims, subjectivities, and forms of agency potentially available. They also suggest different sources of ideas about value and worth. Logics of mothering have been used to justify delegating responsibility to the family and home, but also public benefits to support maternal care that have suggested different models of provision—from cash assistance to poor mothers, to universal basic income models to support mothers to stay home with infants, and family medical leave. The political identities favored by this logic view the caregiver as a flexible and accommodating nurturer and custodian. Whereas logics of education tend to favor institutionally delivered education, such as preschool, emphasizing the developmental benefits for children and the role of the caregiver as educator. These logics take on different meanings depending on the policies and contexts in which they are deployed.

Among the sources of contradictions between competing care logics are how they get expressed in and through occupational movements. These tensions are illustrated in a recent *New York Times* article that asked why it was that child care providers had to return to work and teachers were able to work remotely during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic (Shapiro 2021). Through caregivers' statements about their role and work, logics of mothering and workfare were present in explaining why child care providers had to return to work. Their wages were funded through social welfare laws and funding streams that understood child care provision as work support, which oriented their role to serving essential workers by providing care to their children. Even as some caregivers stated their presence was mandatory, others interpreted the mandate and risks that followed it, by framing it as a service mission, to flexibly care for children with different needs. One preschool teacher described her role, "When we are here, we play all the roles: teachers, moms, friends" (Shapiro 2021). In contrast, teachers and some constituencies of early childhood educators drew on educational logics, asserting their stated occupational purpose was to educate children, rather than serve a custodial role or serve as "babysitters." Educational logics offered teachers protections by way of unions to be sure, but they are also based on cultural ideas that help to justify their claims to professional autonomy and control over working conditions; logics of mothering and workfare limit the legitimacy of political claims to worker autonomy. In this political-legal context, caregivers of young children with educational credentials have been strategically aligning with educational logics to justify claims to better pay, union protection, and thus the autonomy to shape their working conditions. This strategy of boundary-making and occupational closure inevitably leaves out other caregivers of young children, such as home-based caregivers, a constituency more likely to be perceived

as “unskilled” and unprotected by labor laws. I also observe this pattern in an archival project on the advocacy strategies of feminist child care workers during the 1980s and 1990s. Members began with broader political goals but when encountered with contextual constraints, including the limits of equal opportunity laws and claims to wage discrimination, they pursued professionalization to achieve wage increases (Taing 2021). The framing and claims-making choices of occupational movements are consequential to shaping understanding of how resources should be distributed, and care is provided; tracing these processes becomes a way for recognizing what might be gained or lost in these struggles for the most vulnerable, for instance, shifting burdens of expectation and responsibility to perform what becomes politically understood as “quality care.”

52.4 Toward a study of the politics of redistribution in care provision

Feminist research’s engagement with social movements is among the avenues for which political imagination and possibilities can be provoked. We continue to envision and build systems and supports that enable and sustain care and caregiving—from universal child and family care, a guaranteed basic income, and a living wage for all who perform this work. Revisiting questions of political goals, priorities, and strategy, by asking what we want and how we ask for what we want—the claims we make to justify our demands—and what is gained and what is lost from these political decisions for possible class formations and solidarities is one avenue for redirecting feminist concerns about the enduring devaluation and exploitation of what is traditionally considered women’s work. Navigating a global pandemic has laid bare the inequalities embedded in organizations of care and labor in the US—namely why it is that existing systems are not oriented toward serving the needs of caregivers and the cared for. The recognition of care work and its gendered and racialized features, and what this work makes possible, compelled state action to provide concrete, material benefits to certain forms of caregiving. At this writing, the US government has introduced a child tax credit that functions like universal basic income for families with children (DeParle 2021). Most significant is that accessing this public benefit was not based on work status. Embedded in laws and policies are symbols and meanings available as resources for the claims we might make. How this policy moment might become an opportunity to further “demand as provocation” as the basis for reimagining the nature of work in our lives and how the state might support such ends is ongoing (Weeks 2011, 131).

The sources of value of care work—as labor and activity need not draw from its economic function, or defining its associated tasks with a set of skills to demonstrate it as “real work,” rather defining this work on its terms can come from the creativity and creative expression that comes from performing it (hooks 1984) and articulating the varied social welfare goals we believe care provision aims to accomplish. For caregiving to be understood on its own terms also involves recognizing the role of laws and policies that organize and shape relations between caregivers and the cared for. Drawing from intersectionality, studies can critically ground care work itself in an understanding of contemporary structures of care arrangements—both informal and formal. This interest in understanding how caregivers and the cared for are constituted by laws and policies, helps us to consider what emergent logics and political possibilities might be available for shaping future politics and movements. Divesting care work research of productivist logics—that is emphasizing its value and utility to the capitalist economy—is especially urgent as neoliberal economic restructuring over the last several decades has eroded the normative idea that the pursuit of work and securing an economic life delivers the promise of mobility and at minimum survival. Feminist researchers can aid in expanding our political imaginations that

recognize care and caregiving on its own terms, for the purpose of envisioning new class formations and solidarities among Black women and women of color.

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IN THE CROSSHAIRS

Black women, self-defense, and the politics of armed citizenship

Caroline Light and Claire Boine

My mother used to have guns ... her NRA sticker, prominently displayed on a window at the front door, was a warning that the people in this home didn't play. When I divorced in 1976 the gun my husband and I owned went onto his stack in the division [of] community property. Now, I understand the need for a gun for my own protection because so many white people's racism has been seeping out from under their rocks of seemingly normalcy. My granddaughter and daughter's family discovered a black gun dealership in a town within driving distance ... business is so good you have to make an appointment. Black people have always been in the crosshairs of racist America. Now with a racist president providing law enforcement permission to kill us outright in daylight we need protection from white people who adopt this behavior as their new norm.

—*Ardyth Shaw*, *The New York Times comment section*, July 1, 2020¹

When Ardyth Shaw, a retired media professional from San Diego, posted to the comments section of *The New York Times* on July 1, 2020, she was responding to an article on the ostensible surge in Black gun ownership, in turn a response to “so many white people's racism ... seeping out from under their rocks of seeming normalcy.” Shaw's observations of a contemporary public landscape of anti-Black violence—perpetrated by the state and empowered by the then-president's blatant racism, as well as by racist individuals—were couched in her experience observing her mother's armed defense of their home. She tracks her shifting attitude towards guns against the perpetual backdrop of white supremacy but with a noted shift in contemporary attitudes due in large part to the Trump administration's unvarnished racism. For Shaw and the six authors of the op-ed, firearms remain vital instruments of self-defense against persistent anti-Black violence, and never more so than in an era of increasingly armed and empowered white supremacist militancy.

Shaw's evocative description of Black people “in the crosshairs of racist America” also alludes to the particular vulnerability, and what historian Kellie Carter Jackson has termed Black women's “self-protective” responsibility to the security of their targeted communities. Contemporary scholarship by Black feminist historians, including Jackson, Jasmin Young, and Ashley Farmer, reveal Black women's traditions of self-armament in the service of self and collective protection from white supremacist violence.² Their work documents the ways in which Black women—

from abolitionists and anti-lynching activists to modern civil rights leaders and Black nationalists—used firearms to resist racial terror. These histories complicate dominant assumptions about nonviolence as the core principle of Black civil rights while challenging gendered and raced assumptions about the nature of forceful resistance. Histories of Black women’s armed resistance command public attention today, amidst an unprecedented surge in firearm purchases, and in which Black women purportedly play a significant role. While anecdotal evidence suggests that gun ownership among women and people of color is on the rise, reliable data on Black women’s patterns of gun acquisition, specifically their attitudes towards guns and gun ownership, remain scarce. This data gap stems in large part from the nation’s long-standing, arguably deliberate absence of reliable, scientifically gathered information on civilian gun ownership.³ The problem is also methodological: data on the gun-owning habits and attitudes of women, particularly Black and other non-white women, remains elusive as long as experts and policy makers inter-rogate only the gender *or* racial implications of gun ownership and use.

To discern the nature of contemporary gun ownership among Black women, particularly the ways in which Black female gun owners understand gun ownership in ways that diverge from Black men, white women, and non-Black women of color, we analyze data from the National Use of Guns 2019 original and 2020 follow-up surveys (NLUGS). There were 2,086 respondents, of which 51 identified as Black women. Given our small sample size, it’s tempting to ask: to what extent do Black women gun owners *matter*? Our data suggest that Black women—uniquely positioned “in the crosshairs” of contemporary gender, racial, class, and sexual violence⁴—expose the profound ruptures in theories and practices of self-defense foundational to this nation’s prevailing ethos of armed citizenship.

53.1 Violent epidemics: the spring 2020 “gun surge” as intersectional quandary

Starting in March 2020, amidst the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic as a national emergency and subsequent stay-at-home orders issued by state and local governments, the nation witnessed a dramatic spike in gun sales. The FBI’s NICS system, which tracks the number of background checks performed by licensed gun dealers, recorded 33% more background checks in 2020 than the prior year, with July and August witnessing the most significant increases. In total, some eleven million firearms were sold throughout the year.⁵ To explain the phenomenon, the Brookings Institute noted in July that “when Americans are concerned about their personal security, they buy firearms.” Their report suggests that the spike in firearm sales accompanied “a general sense of national apprehension” in response to the pandemic, growing social movements against police violence, and widespread civil unrest.⁶

Who was buying these guns, and why? Consistent with much contemporary scholarship correlating anti-Black racism and gun acquisition, the Brookings Institute researchers presumed that white racial animus played a critical role.⁷ The report suggests that the nationwide wave of Black Lives Matter and other anti-racist demonstrations—including demands to abolish or defund the police—helped amplify implicitly racialized anxieties about “riots,” “mob violence,” and “anarchy,” driving many panic-stricken whites to gun shops. As demonstrations proliferated across the nation in response to the highly publicized killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, conservative news media (fueled by the president) depicted Black Lives Matter, antifa, and other progressive resistance movements as violent and threatening to predominantly white suburbs and to public safety more generally.⁸

In the absence of reliable data on first-time gun purchases, and given that the FBI’s tracking system doesn’t indicate whether guns are purchased by people who already own guns, it is

difficult to say whether the 2020 spike translates to a spread of gun ownership, or a concentration of more guns into the same, predominantly white and male, hands. Further, it is difficult to determine the extent to which people driving the “surge” in gun sales are motivated to gun stores by fear, and if so, the precise origins of that fear. Are new gun buyers more fearful of civil unrest and anti-racist activism, characterized as riotous and threatening to law and order, or are their fears rooted in the well-documented spike in race-related hate crimes, amplified by police and state complicity in perpetrating structural and physical violence against the most vulnerable Americans? Indeed, spikes in racial violence and widespread insecurity related to the coronavirus and attendant economic and political turmoil have been well-documented.⁹ Where do these seemingly disparate sources of fear-based motivation converge? We need a robustly “intersectional” lens to understand the complex nuances of contemporary gun buyers’ motivations, especially as they expose vital shifts in the composition and appeal of armed citizenship beyond its traditional investments in white masculine impunity.

The data gaps on gun purchases have allowed some organizations, like the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), a conservative trade association and champion of unfettered “gun rights,” to seize the opportunity to amplify a message that guns are *the* universal solution to widespread feelings of unease and precarity. While verifiable data on rates of non-white and female gun ownership are elusive, the NSSF has claimed a steady increase in firearm ownership among women and people of color. According to their data, based on a May 2020 survey of 175 gun store owners, the NSSF concluded that women constituted 40 percent and African Americans 58 percent of first-time gun buyers from January through April 2020.¹⁰ That these figures have been cited and republished in many popular media outlets, including mainstream and politically moderate newspapers, testifies to pervasive public interest in the spread of gun ownership among populations less traditionally associated with the nation’s dominant “gun culture.”¹¹ Yet the NSSF figures are highly suspect, dependent on (a small sample of) gun sellers’ anecdotal observations and opinions, rather than actual sales records broken down by gender and race.

The NSSF’s claim of a spike in first-time gun purchases among people of color and women speaks to a more general effort by promoters of “gun rights” to signal the expanding diversity of US gun ownership as a means of ascribing legitimacy to armed citizenship, while countering claims about the racist and sexist underpinnings of the nation’s prevailing gun culture. Appeals to the increasing racial and gender diversity of gun owners are consistent with gun rights organizations’ efforts to rebrand themselves as defenders of civil rights, and to disparage any/all gun regulation as a vestige of the nation’s racist past.¹² In fact, gun rights advocates are rewriting history to claim that all efforts to regulate guns are intrinsically racist. Recent scholarship by Joshua Horowitz and Anderson Casey exposes how contemporary “insurrectionism,” a predominantly white, male movement for unfettered gun rights, claims that Black enslavement was made possible by governmental “gun control” and the disarmament of Black people.¹³ Other scholars document the extent to which guns have historically enabled predominantly powerful (white, male, propertied) individuals to acquire power and land while subjugating and extracting labor from nonwhite populations.¹⁴

History is rife with examples of Black Americans using firearms to resist white supremacist violence,¹⁵ and the recent gun surge seems to reflect that history. There is much that seems familiar about the concerns of contemporary Black gun owners given spiking hate crimes, police violence, and an increasingly visible movement of armed white extremists claiming to “protect” property, often with the former president’s support.¹⁶ According to the authors of the July 1 *New York Times* article,

This is by no means the first time many Black Americans have felt the need to arm themselves for self-preservation. But with a white couple pulling guns on Black Lives Matter protesters in St. Louis, right-wing extremists increasing attacks and co-opting rallies to advance their own messaging and half of Black Americans already feeling that they can't trust the police to treat them equally, some Black Americans are saying they now have no choice but to exercise their Second Amendment right.

While we see echoes of the past, today's gun surge evinces the suturing of neoliberal destruction of social welfare in favor of an individual ethos of "armed citizenship." Where once the essence of Black armed resistance emphasized collective protection, our contemporary "gun rights" landscape deploys universalizing appeals to radically individuated, "entrepreneurial" solutions to widespread, entrenched structural liabilities.¹⁷

For opportunistic corporate and legislative partners in contemporary neoliberal "gun rights" orthodoxy, appeals to the special vulnerabilities of women and non-white people prove expedient. Not only are they able to spread the message of armed citizenship to new markets beyond the traditional, predominantly white male, base; such messaging, based on facially universal appeals to safety and security, help refute critics' claims of racism and sexism. Amidst a time of social and economic turmoil, so goes the universalist logic, guns are the most logical security solution for *all* Americans. According to Lawrence G. Keane, NSSF Senior Vice President of General Counsel,

These first-time buyers represent a group of people who, until now, were agnostic regarding firearm ownership. That's rapidly changing, and these Americans are taking hold of their God-given right to keep and bear arms and protect themselves and their loved ones.

While the NSSF narrative allows for surface recognition of the particular threats facing non-whites and women, they ignore both the unique experiences of Black women and women of color, as well as the structural and historical sources of their precarity.

There exists abundant evidence of other compelling motivations for gun purchases at play not only during the 2020 spike, but more generally in the recent past. And for many Black women living in contemporary America, firearms appear as a rational solution to a deep-seated sense of insecurity against the backdrop of persistent violence towards communities of color. For women "in the crosshairs" of multiple intersecting power structures, facing the escalating threat of violence to their own homes and communities, obtaining and carrying a firearm feels like taking one's safety firmly and capably into one's own hands.

53.2 "A Winchester rifle": histories of Black women's armed self-defense

It was journalist and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells who famously wrote, "a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give."¹⁸ As a Black woman coming of age in the 19th-century, Wells was intimately familiar with the multiply entangled violences of sexism and racial capitalism. Her efforts to expose the distorted sexual and racial logics of lynching generated virulent backlash that forced her to flee Memphis and continue her crusade from Chicago.¹⁹ Black women's contemporary gun ownership exists in self-conscious relation to legacies like Wells's, extending back to Black abolitionists who were, according to Kellie Carter Jackson, unable to "play the

role of a damsel in distress because slavery neither afforded them the luxury of being seen as damsels nor considered their distress.”²⁰ Jackson’s work illuminates the vital role of Black women as often armed resisters of racialized patriarchy, not only as individuals but as protectors of their uniquely vulnerable and targeted communities. At the core of Black women’s “protective violence,” writes Jackson, was the “employment of force to protect themselves and their communities and ultimately promote the overthrow of slavery. While self-defense implies an individual act to protect oneself, protective violence seeks to protect all vulnerable people and even entire communities.”²¹ Armed Black women—from Harriet Tubman and Ida B. Wells to Daisy Bates and Assata Shakur—were united by a *collective* experience of precariousness, a position of embodied exposure as well as structural critique.

While precise data on Black women’s gun ownership is sparse, journalists have tracked a surge of interest in guns and gun clubs among Black women, many of whom report “feeling less safe in the era of Trump.”²² A sense of structural critique alongside historical recognition recurs in contemporary stories of Black women’s gun use. Some, like Ty Shaw, expressed a need for guns to protect themselves from public, state-supported white violence as well as more private criminal violence. Ms. Shaw started her Facebook page for Armed Empress in 2013 to provide “a global platform for women of color united around the ideal of self-defense and the protection of their families.”²³ In 2017 she acknowledged that Trump’s election and the subsequent surge in white supremacist aggression were motivating Black women’s pursuit of firearms and related training. Shaw also emphasized the ongoing, historic need for American women of color to be concerned for their own and their families’ safety.²⁴ Since Black women often experienced simultaneous class, gender, and racial violence—including threats to their homes and property—Shaw perceived guns and the knowledge to use them safely as essential means of “empowering women with the tools needed to defend themselves.”²⁵ Toni Jackson of Richmond, Virginia explained, “What’s going on in the country right now, I’m afraid to be out by myself as a Black woman.” She cited white grievance and backlash at growing, nationwide efforts to dismantle or remove Confederate monuments from public spaces.²⁶

According to Douglas Jefferson, the vice president of the National African American Gun Association (NAAGA), “The year 2020 has been just one long advertisement for why someone may want to have a firearm to defend themselves.” Jefferson reported witnessing the greatest increase in NAAGA membership since the group’s founding in 2015.²⁷ Marchelle “Tig” Washington founded “My Sister’s Keeper Defense” to provide firearm training and safety information with Black women’s specific concerns in mind. As a “survivor of sexual assault and domestic violence,” Washington explained her sense of comfort in “knowing that I don’t have to be a victim anymore because I know I can defend myself.”²⁸ Participants at the “GIRLZ on FIRE (Feminine, Independent, Resilient, and Empowered)” firearm training center in High Point, North Carolina reported similar feelings of vulnerability in witnessing the mobilization of armed, white supremacist militias both nationwide and locally.²⁹ And while these very public manifestations of armed white supremacy loom large, many women express their motivation to acquire guns as rooted in a need to protect their homes and families, reflecting longer traditions of Black women’s role as stalwart defenders of Black private space.

53.3 Lawful use and self-protection: interpreting the 2019 survey

Our study of Black women gun owners draws from the 2019 National Lawful Use of Guns Survey (NLUGS).³⁰ Among the 2,086 gun owners surveyed, 51 identified as Black women, 30 as Hispanic women, and 463 as white women.³¹ Although the subsample of Black women gun owners may not be nationally representative, their responses reveal some illuminating trends that

contribute vital nuance and complexity to studies of contemporary US “gun culture.” The survey data reveal that Black women—more so than white or non-Black women of color—express specific inclinations regarding their reasons for having a gun, particularly through their political affiliation and in their assumptions about “protection.” Against the wider cultural backdrop of the Trump era—defined by more visibly expressed, armed white supremacist aggression from the former president’s reactionary white base—many Black women experience an urgent need to protect themselves and their loved ones.

According to some researchers who study patterns in gun consumption and use, the contemporary “gun culture” is characterized by a shift to “Gun Culture 2.0” in which guns are perceived as essential to one’s safety and self-defense, rather than as tools of recreation or hunting/subsistence.³² A trend towards seeing guns foremost as tools of self-defense has echoed through survey-based data since the late 20th century.³³ The shift towards armed self-defense took hold roughly coinciding with the NRA’s 1977 political transition to their current “gun rights” orthodoxy that precludes any gun regulations. As interest in hunting waned, firearm manufacturers sought out new markets, eagerly grasping hold of growing concerns about “urban crime” while opportunistically latching onto feminist advocacy for women’s self-defense against perceived “stranger danger.”³⁴ The late 20th century witnessed the expanded production of smaller, more easily concealable handguns for use as vital tools of self-defense. The turn to armed citizenship drew affective urgency from racialized and gendered suspicions about dangerous strangers lurking in public spaces, threatening to transgress the cherished boundaries of home, even as women’s largest statistical threat remains their own predominantly male acquaintances and intimate partners. The shift to self-defense fit neatly amidst neoliberal withdrawal from social services and support, which amplified the perceived need for citizens to perform the work of policing for themselves and their communities.³⁵ Armed self-defense, performed in service of self and (dependent, adjacent) others given a glaring deficiency of life-sustaining governance, has taken on the appearance as *the* definitive act of good citizenship. Increasingly, invocations of armed citizenship have taken on the veneer of inclusive universality. According to sociologist David Yamane,

Gun Culture 2.0 is more inclusive because self-defense is a universal concern. Empirically, defensive gun owners tend to be more racially diverse, more urban and suburban, more politically liberal, more female, and more likely to have young kids than traditional gun owners.³⁶

At least on the surface, our survey data reflect that Black women are more likely to possess guns in the context of the celebrated and “inclusive” “Gun Culture 2.0.” The data provide some clear ways in which the experiences and attitudes of Black women gun owners differ substantially from Black men and white women. Notably, when asked for the primary reason they own a firearm, Black women are the ones with the highest proportion of respondents who need to protect themselves (39 percent) (Table 53.1). When giving multiple reasons for their ownership, Black women are also the lowest group on recreational activities like target shooting and hunting. This trend is also reflected in the average number of firearms owned by each population group. Black women reported owning relatively few, 2.3 firearms per person on average, and mostly (easily concealable) pistols. When individuals own firearms to protect themselves or their family, they do not need as many as they would if they had multiple reasons, including hunting and/or firearm collection.

The proportion of Black women’s investment in self-defense, which significantly exceeds those of white women respondents, is consistent with Black women’s near exclusion from traditional recreational gun culture. Hunting, for instance, has historically been a pursuit dominated

Table 53.1 Characteristics of gun ownership by gender, race, and ethnicity

	<i>Black women</i> (<i>n</i> = 51)	<i>Hispanic women</i> (<i>n</i> = 29)	<i>White women</i> (<i>n</i> = 463)	<i>Black men</i> (<i>n</i> = 85)	<i>Hispanic men</i> (<i>n</i> = 83)	<i>White men</i> (<i>n</i> = 1,276)
What are your reasons for owning a firearm (non-mutually exclusive)?						
To protect my family	80%	82%	78%	85%	78%	74%
To protect myself	88%	86%	82%	87%	78%	78%
For my job	14%	14%	3%	7%	12%	6%
To exercise my constitutional right	41%	62%	54%	47%	60%	58%
It is a tradition in my family	24%	28%	35%	11%	19%	34%
To manage pests	14%	28%	29%	19%	18%	27%
For hunting	8%	28%	28%	16%	33%	44%
For target shooting	18%	31%	40%	26%	51%	55%
To protect my community	31%	41%	35%	32%	38%	43%
To collect them	22%	28%	26%	32%	37%	42%
Because they make me feel powerful	16%	10%	6%	5%	6%	6%
If you have to choose only one, what is your primary reason for owning a firearm?						
To protect my family	45%	41%	35%	59%	49%	42%
To protect myself	39%	31%	26%	20%	16%	9%
For my job	8%	0%	1%	1%	2%	2%
To exercise my constitutional right	4%	3%	4%	4%	8%	9%
It is a tradition in my family	2%	0%	6%	5%	1%	5%
To manage pests	2%	7%	6%	4%	2%	4%
For hunting	0%	10%	10%	4%	1%	15%
For target shooting	0%	3%	9%	4%	10%	10%
To protect my community	0%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%
To collect them	0%	0%	2%	0%	8%	4%
Because they make me feel powerful	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
How many of the following firearms do you own?						
Pistols	1.1	1.5	1.2	1.4	1.6	1.6
Revolvers	0.7	1	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.9
Shotguns	0.2	1	0.8	0.8	0.8	1.4
Rifles	0.4	1.2	1	0.9	0.6	1.9
Total firearms	2.3	5	3.3	3.2	4.3	5.8

Source: Siegel, Michael & Boine, Claire. NATIONAL LAWFUL USE OF GUNS SURVEY, 2020 [Computer file]. Compiled by Boston University School of Public Health, Department of Community Health Sciences.

by white men.³⁷ In response to survey questions designed to gauge how gun owners experience a collective identity *as* gun owners, Black women reported thinking of themselves as gun owners significantly less than other respondents. For instance, only 18 percent of Black women reported that “when [they] talk about gun owners, [they] usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they,’” compared to 36 percent of the other respondents.³⁸

Another striking finding is that the proportion of politically progressive gun owners is much higher among Black women (Figure 53.1). Women who report being “extremely liberal or liberal” represented 10 percent of whites, 13 percent of Hispanics, and 22 percent of Black women. If we add the number of women who report being “slightly liberal,” almost a third of

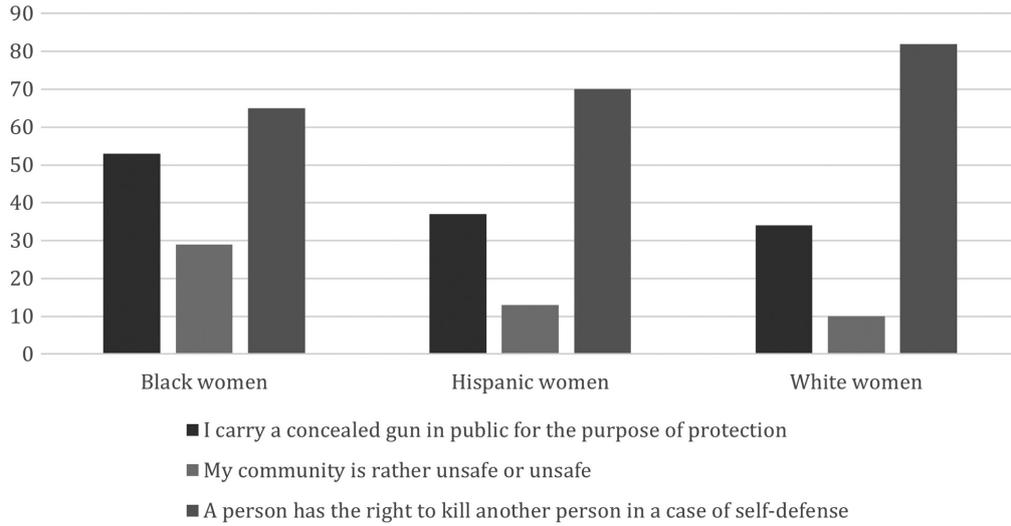


Figure 53.1 Ideology among gun owners.

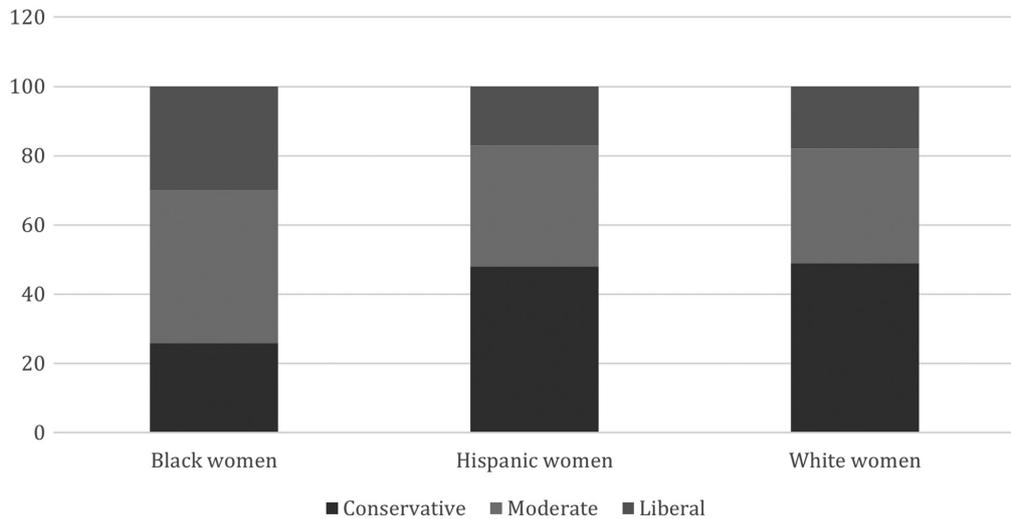


Figure 53.2 Gap between values and practice.

Black female gun owners in the sample identified as liberal. This discovery is consistent with contemporary scholarship documenting histories of Black women activists who used firearms to resist white supremacist, patriarchal oppression.³⁹ The Black women in this sample were also significantly less likely to express or support antifeminist ideas. They were five times less likely than other female gun owners to believe that the #MeToo movement creates an unsafe environment for men (odds ratio = 0.21, p-value = 0.001), and they were ten times less likely than other women to report that women are becoming too demanding in their pursuit of equal rights (odds ratio = 0.08, p-value = 0.012).

A striking discovery in the survey is that racial differences in women’s beliefs and practices of self-defense seem to extend in opposite directions (Figure 53.2). Black women are the most likely of all female respondents to own a weapon for self-protection, to carry a concealed firearm, and to report feeling unsafe in their local community. In fact, although the odds of reporting feeling unsafe in one’s community are almost twice as high for a woman versus a man (odds ratio = 1.5, p-value = 0.02), and almost three times as high for a white versus a Black person

(odds ratio = 2.5, p-value = 0.00), they are five times greater for a Black woman than for any other survey participants (odds ratio = 5.38, p-value = 0.000). Given Black women's historic and on-going experiences of patriarchal and racist violence, particularly their disproportionate targeting by law enforcement,⁴⁰ it should not be surprising that most Black female survey participants acquired their guns primarily for protective reasons.

Although they are significantly more likely to report owning and carrying firearms for protection, Black women are the least likely of all female survey participants to approve of killing someone in self-defense. The survey responses suggest that those least likely to be targeted by white supremacist and sexist violence—white men—are the most supportive of killing in self-defense while those most likely to be targeted by white supremacist and sexist violence—Black women—are the least supportive of self-defensive gun use in *practice*. One possible explanation for this divergence in attitudes towards self-defensive theory versus practice reflects respondents' relative social privilege. Black women gun owners may be more critical of lethal self-defense, given their awareness of and proximity to those subject to legalized violence, including police violence and “Stand Your Ground” laws. Indeed, 53 percent of the Black women in our study oppose “Stand Your Ground” laws, compared to 23 percent of the other respondents.

These findings suggest that, in spite of their being at the highest risk of victimization, whether inside or outside the home, Black women gun owners demonstrate a more critical attitude towards using a gun to kill someone, even in self-defense. Black women gun owners' less punitive views of self-defensive gun use may also be related to their more politically progressive identities when compared to those of the non-Black women in our sample.⁴¹

Our data show how Black women—by far the most politically and morally “progressive” respondents in this sample—are also the most likely to mistrust the state. Fifty-five percent reported that the federal government can rarely or never be trusted to make decisions in a fair way and 54 percent believe the government can rarely or never be trusted to tell the truth. In comparison, only 45 percent of white women, 40 percent white men and Hispanic women and men, and 30 percent of Black men believe that the federal government can rarely or never be trusted to make decisions in a fair way. Black women were also the least likely to answer affirmatively to the question: “it upsets me when people are not loyal to their country,” scoring an average 2.5, while the average of all other respondents was 3.6.

Previous research highlights a correlation of firearm acquisition with lower confidence in the federal government, but without tracking the differential sources of governmental suspicion or analyzing the way people's experiences of structural exclusion influence their pursuit of guns.⁴² If Black women are more suspicious of the government and less likely to value national “loyalty” than other respondents, the reasons diverge. For instance, only 4 percent of Black women in our survey reported that President Trump was usually or always treated unfairly by the media, whereas the average for all the other respondents was 54 percent. Similarly, 28 percent of Black women believed in the existence of a “deep state” compared to 37 percent of all other respondents.

The only gun violence prevention policy that Black women oppose more than the other respondents is “May Issue” laws, which provide police discretion in whether or not to issue concealed-carry permits to civilians. 48 percent of Black women oppose May Issue Laws, compared to only 34 percent of the other respondents.⁴³ Black women reported high rates of concealed-carry—motivated by self-protection in both public as well as private spaces—they also experience lower trust in the capacity of police to issue concealed-carry permits equitably.

While distrust of the government characterizes the proliferating groups of armed, predominantly male, white extremists—like Boogalou Bois, Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, and Three

Percenter—they distrust a state that has always been on their side. Armed Black women come by their suspicions of the state honestly. Why should they trust a government that has historically failed to offer real, substantive protection from white supremacist violence, while systematically exposing them and their communities to both public *and* private violence? The simultaneous victimization and criminalization of Black women and girls has a long history in the US, one with profound effects on the stubbornly interrelated problems of gun violence and carcerality. According to the Violence Policy Center, Black women were killed at more than double the rate of white women in 2015, 93 percent by men they knew and more than half with a firearm.⁴⁴ Black women are also incarcerated at twice (Hispanic women at 1.4 times) the rate of white women.⁴⁵ The disparities are even greater for Black, Brown, and Indigenous girls, when compared to white girls. Given the wider socio-historical context in which Black women have learned—time and time again—to mistrust the state, our data confirm that many continue to view guns as essential tools of collective self-protection, not only for themselves, but for their loved ones and communities.

Gendered and racialized ideas of vulnerability and threat—who is in need of protection and from whom—surface too in the data. Sociologist Jennifer Carlson shows that, although guns are marketed to women for their personal safety, the “vulnerability politics” of armed citizenship assumes “a particular understanding of crime that reproduces masculine privilege by emphasizing fast, warlike violence perpetrated by strangers—the kinds of crime men, as opposed to women, are more likely to face,” while downplaying domestic and intimate partner violence.⁴⁶ This widespread fear of threatening, indeterminate strangers co-exists alongside the well-documented statistical reality that women are far more likely to be harmed or killed by men they know.⁴⁷

The survey data reveal concretely that the driving motivators of Black women’s gun ownership extend beyond their gender socialization or racial ascription. Indeed, the data point to critical complexities in the ways Black women complicate dominant understandings of armed citizenship and “protection.” Embodied experiences of insecurity, alongside deep, historically rooted distrust of the state, provide Black female respondents with a more critical understanding of armed protection, one that captures the racial and gender hypocrisies of legalized gun carry and use in alleged self-defense. And yet, Black women and women of color do not experience racism in uniform ways, and these experiences are inflected by other identity frames including class, ability, sexuality, and region, variables that our small sample may not be able to capture.⁴⁸

Our findings suggest that greater attention to Black women and women of color gun owners is vital to on-going efforts to resist gun-related violence and injury. In response to the July 1, 2020, *New York Times* article on Black gun ownership, a reader named “C,” identified as “a black gun owner,” addressed the inadequacy of contemporary gun violence resistance efforts that fail to consider the unique vulnerabilities of identifiably non-white people. While acknowledging the need for “sensible gun laws,” C explained

the disheartening thing is how some of that opinion prevalent among liberals is just starting to sound indistinguishable from the right’s “all lives matter” brand of racism, especially here in these comments. There’s such a disconnect, and people who are just blindly anti-gun don’t always know what it’s like.⁴⁹

C’s comment illuminates the taxing effects of political identification, gun culture, and the failure of “anti-gun” white liberals to comprehend the disproportionate affective burden of white supremacist violence.

Attention to the particular attitudes and experiences of Black female gun owners reveals the often hidden raced and gendered incongruities in the prevailing tropes of vulnerability and threat that shape our contemporary gun culture. The exposition of these nuanced, interlocking epistememes of empowerment is essential to on-going efforts to address our disproportionately distributed gun violence problems, beyond a matter of facile partisanship. For Tig Washington, professional firearm trainer and owner of “My Sister’s Keeper Defense,” Black women delineate the direction of contemporary gun culture:

The biggest myth is that we’re all Republican, Christian, NRA supporters. I’m none of those things and neither are the majority of my students. That might have been true 20–30 years ago but in 2020 gun ownership and self defense is for everyone.⁵⁰

But is contemporary armed citizenship really “for everyone?” The universality Yamane and others claim as the heart of Gun Culture 2.0 rings hollow given the extensive evidence of armed citizenship’s racial limitations, including well-publicized incidents in which Black “good guys with guns” were shot and killed by police, who assumed they were criminals.⁵¹ And when Black women participate in armed citizenship in the service of their own and their loved one’s protection, they too face the wider culture’s legal and epistemic injustice. Legal scholar Samone Ijoma cautions, “even though Black women have long taken up guns as tools of individual and collective self-defense, our laws rarely protect their right to do so. In fact, they are more likely to be criminalized and punished for their survival.”⁵²

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