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The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory

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Abstract

In feminist theory, intersectionality has become the predominant way of conceptualizing the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege. The aim of this essay is to clarify the origins of intersectionality as a metaphor, and its theorization as a provisional concept in Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's work, followed by its uptake and mainstreaming as a paradigm by feminist theorists in a period marked by its widespread and rather unquestioned – if, at times, superficial and inattentive – usage. I adduce four analytic benefits of intersectionality as a research paradigm: simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility, and inclusivity. Then, I gesture at some critiques of intersectionality advanced in the last few years, during which the concept has increasingly come under scrutiny.

It has become commonplace within feminist theory to claim that women's lives are constructed by multiple, intersecting systems of oppression. This insight – that oppression is not a singular process or a binary political relation, but is better understood as constituted by multiple, converging, or interwoven systems – originates in antiracist feminist critiques of the claim that women's oppression could be captured through an analysis of gender alone. Intersectionality is offered as a theoretical and political remedy to what is perhaps 'the most pressing problem facing contemporary feminism – the long and painful legacy of its exclusions' (K. Davis 70). Intersectionality theory has been celebrated as the 'most important contribution that women's studies has made so far' (McCall 1771). Indeed, the influence of intersectionality has extended beyond the academy to international human rights discourses, as reflected by references made to it by the United Nations' Beijing Platform for Action (2000), the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2000), and the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, which in its resolution on the human rights of women 'recognized the importance of examining the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination' (2002) (qtd. in Yuval-Davis 193; see also Patel).

Yet the appropriation of intersectionality by 'women's studies' and 'feminist theory' (which remain white-dominated discourses) can serve to obscure its origins in Black feminist thought. Jean Ait Belkhir emphasizes the generative role of Black feminism in the development of integrative approaches to theorizing oppression(s): '[u]ntil the emergence of black feminism in the United States, not a single social theorist took seriously the concept of the simultaneity of [race, gender and class] intersection in people's lives. This concept is one of the greatest gifts of *black women's studies* to social theory as a whole' (303, emphasis added). The apparent consensus that marks the ascendancy or 'mainstreaming' of intersectionality elides its critical impetus, that is, the fact that the metaphor emerges as a critique of white solipsism within feminist discourses. Moreover, the construction of a feminist consensus around 'intersectionality' occludes ongoing contestations between 'mainstreaming' and 'critical' understandings of intersectionality (see Dhamoon; Carastathis, *Reinvigorating Intersectionality*) or between a 'more robust version of intersectionality […] tied to the concerns of […] disempowered groups' and a 'sanitized, depoliticized version' (Collins, *Emerging* xiv).

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The metaphor of intersecting categories of discrimination was introduced and later elaborated by the Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, one of the founders of Critical Race Theory in the U.S. legal academy. Yet intersectionality has a long history in Black feminism. Its antecedents include the notions of 'double jeopardy' (Beal) or 'multiple jeopardy' (King), and 'interlocking oppressions' (Combahee River Collective). As early as the 19th century in the United States, Black feminists confronted the simultaneity of a 'woman question' and a 'race problem', (qtd. in Guy-Sheftall 45) as Anna Julia Cooper put it in 'the first book-length black feminist text', *A Voice from the South*, published in 1892 (Guy-Sheftall 43; see Gines). By the time that Crenshaw introduced the metaphor of intersectionality to critique dominant conceptions of discrimination in law and in social movements, the language of 'intersections' had already been circulating in contemporaneous antiracist feminist thought (see Nash, *Home Truths*). In the wake of Crenshaw's work, so popular has the concept of intersectionality become that common usage makes it acceptable, in certain circles, for one to refer to 'intersectionality' as a synonym for oppression, without specifying what, in particular, is intersecting, or how. One commentator speculates that its (supposed) 'vagueness and open-endedness […] may be the very secret to its success' (K. Davis 69). Yet flippant or vague references to 'intersectionality' can serve to obscure what is in fact a profound critique of deeply entrenched cognitive habits which inform feminist and antiracist thinking about oppression and privilege. As Crenshaw herself reflects on the itinerary of the concept, intersectionality has had a 'wide reach, but not [a] very deep' one: it is both 'over- and underused; sometimes I can't even recognize it in the literature anymore' (interview qtd. in Berger and Guidroz 76, 65).

In 1989, Crenshaw offered intersectionality as a metaphor (*Demarginalizing*), and, in 1991, she elaborated it as a 'provisional concept' to demonstrate the inadequacy of approaches which separate systems of oppression, isolating and focusing on one, while occluding the others (*Mapping* 1244-5, n9). In a recent interview, she notes,

> [M]y own use of the term 'intersectionality' was just a metaphor. […] I was simply looking at the way all of these systems of oppression overlap. But more importantly, how in the process of that structural convergence rhetorical politics and identity politics – based on the idea that systems of subordination do not overlap – would abandon issues and causes and people who actually were affected by overlapping systems of subordination (Crenshaw qtd. in Guidroz and Berger 65).

The separability of oppressions is premised on centering the essentialized experiences of relatively privileged members of oppressed groups (Harris). Yet the analytic distinction between, for instance, 'racial' oppression and 'gender' oppression distorts their simultaneous operation in the lives of people who experience both (Combahee River Collective 213). If gender oppression and racial oppression have been defined against each other, then one is understood to be oppressed 'as a woman' to the extent that one is not oppressed as a person of color; in other words, racial privilege inflects monistic understandings of gender oppression. As Chandra Mohanty has written, 'the assumption [is] that categories of race and class have to be invisible for gender to be visible' (*Feminism* 107).

The aim of this essay is to clarify the origins of intersectionality as a metaphor, by examining its theorization in Crenshaw's work, followed by its uptake by feminist theorists in a middle period marked by its widespread and rather unquestioned – if, at times, superficial and inattentive – usage. Finally, I expound and respond to some critiques of intersectionality advanced in the last few years, during which time the concept has increasingly come under scrutiny.

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1. Origins

Arguably, some of the traction of the term 'intersectionality' is due to the antecedence of the concept of 'interlocking systems of oppression', defined in a social movement context by the Combahee River Collective, in 'A Black Feminist Statement', as the structural anchor of the experience of simultaneous oppressions and the target of integrated political struggle (13, 16). The early 1980s were marked by the publication of several important texts in antiracist feminist theory in which the language of 'intersections' or the phenomena the concept is taken to name were elaborated (Moraga and Anzaldúa; A. Davis; Smith; Lorde; Hooks; Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes*). [1] It is important to recognize the roots of intersectionality in the political movement of Black women, Chicana and Latina women, and other women of color – most of them lesbian-identified. Crenshaw introduces the metaphor of intersectionality[2] in a legal academic context drawing on and citing this movement history. Moreover, it was her own 'activist engagement [in anti-violence organizing] that brought [her] to this work' (Crenshaw qtd. in Guidroz and Berger 65).[3]

In 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex', Crenshaw demonstrates that 'boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by white women's and Black men's experiences' (143). Crenshaw's analysis of three discrimination suits brought against corporate employers by Black women plaintiffs demonstrates that antidiscrimination laws protect Black women only to the extent that their experiences of discrimination 'coincide' with those of Black men or with those of white women (143). Placing Black women at the center of an analysis of U.S. antidiscrimination law – at the intersection of juridical categories of race and sex discrimination –reveals the inadequacy of doctrinal definitions of discrimination to capture and remedy Black women's concrete experiences of discrimination. Crenshaw asks us to

> [c]onsider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination [...] But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm (149).

Crenshaw shows how monistic definitions of discrimination, which define sex and race as mutually exclusive categories, render the simultaneous experience of gendered racism invisible and legal claims of 'compound' discrimination inadmissible. She argues that legal concepts of discrimination must be revised if they are to serve as remedies to historical and structural oppression. Discrimination must be reconceptualized in terms of the concrete experiences of Black women.

In her more widely read 1991 essay, 'Mapping the Margins', Crenshaw offers a threefold positive definition of intersectionality, the first aspect of which – structural intersectionality – is invoked most often in the operationalization of the concept in the literature. 'Structural intersectionality' refers to 'the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of white women' (Crenshaw 1245). 'Political intersectionality' describes the fact that historically, feminist and antiracist politics in the U.S. 'have functioned in tandem to marginalize issues facing Black women' (Crenshaw 1245). As

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Crenshaw puts it, 'women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas' (1252). Neither agenda is constructed around the experiences, needs, or political vision of women of color, to the extent that antiracism reproduces patriarchy and feminism reproduces racism, women of color are asked to choose between two inadequate analyses, each of which 'constitutes a denial of a fundamental dimension of our subordination' (Crenshaw 1252).[4] 'Representational intersectionality' concerns the production of images of women of color drawing on sexist and racist narratives tropes, as well as the ways that critiques of these representations marginalize or reproduce the objectification of women of color (Crenshaw 1283).

2. Intersectionality as a Paradigm

In addition to the three senses of 'intersectionality' that Crenshaw defines, the term is now used in the literature to refer to the theory or methodology used to identify and study these 'real world' phenomena of structural, political, and representational intersectionality. In this section, I examine intersectionality as a paradigm for contemporary feminist theory and research (see Hancock). As a methodology or heuristic, Patricia Hill Collins notes that intersectionality can be used to study micro-, meso-, and macro-level social phenomena (*Some Group Matters*).[5] Specifically, as Bonnie Thornton Dill and Ruth Enid Zambrana write, intersectionality reveals 'the workings of power, which is understood as both pervasive and oppressive […] at all levels of social relations' (11). Drawing on Collins' influential account of power in *Black Feminist Thought*, Dill and Zambrana argue that 'intersectional analyses, as knowledge generated from and about oppressed groups, unveil [… structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal dimensions] of power and reveal how oppression is constructed and maintained through multiple aspects of identity' (7; see Collins *Black Feminist Thought*).

Four main analytic benefits are imputed to intersectionality as a research methodology or theoretical framework: simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility, and inclusivity. In contrast to unitary or additive approaches to theorizing oppression, which privilege a foundational category and either ignore or merely 'add' others to it, intersectionality insists that multiple, co-constituting analytic categories are operative and equally salient in constructing institutionalized practices and lived experiences. Since 'a real-life person is not, for example, a woman on Monday, a member of the working class on Tuesday, and a woman of African descent on Wednesday', intersectionality responds to the 'theoretical demand […] to read these categories simultaneously' (Russell 47). There are two variations on the claim that intersectionality meets that theoretical demand. The first is the phenomenological claim that intersectionality captures how oppressions are experienced simultaneously. The second is the ontological claim that intersectionality can theorize the convergence, co-constitution, imbrication, or interwovenness of systems of oppression. Crenshaw's concept of structural intersectionality aims to render visible phenomenological experiences of people who face multiple forms of oppression without fragmenting those experiences through categorial exclusion; and it conceptualizes their ontological anchor in interlocking social structures which are given equal explanatory salience. By contrast, as Angela Harris writes, essentialist constructions of unitary categories 'fragment' Black women's experiences, 'as those who are "only interested in race" and those who are "only interested in gender" take the separate slices of our lives' (Harris 589).

The second purported theoretical benefit of intersectionality is that, unlike monistic approaches, it accounts for or captures experiential and structural complexity. Leslie McCall distinguishes between three kinds of complexity that intersectionality as a heuristic attempts

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to grasp, which correspond to three approaches to 'managing complexity' (1773). The intercategorical approach 'focuses on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories' (McCall 1786). The intracategorical approach examines complexity within a social group. Such groups, located 'at neglected points of intersection' of axes of oppression, are studied through an intracategorical lens 'in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience' of their members (McCall 1774). Finally, a third intersectional approach that McCall identifies is the 'anticategorical' approach, 'which is based on a methodology that deconstructs analytical categories. Social life is considered too irreducibly complex [...] to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions' (McCall 1773). All three intersectional approaches agree that monistic, single-axis (that is, non-intersectional) approaches fail to capture the complexity of social structures and subjective experiences. The claim is that monistic approaches to oppression are reductive: they reduce the 'complex' experiences of 'simultaneous' oppressions to simplistic unitary categories.

A corollary of the simultaneity and complexity benefits is the irreducibility benefit. Rather than reducing the phenomena of oppression to one foundational explanatory category (for instance, class), and ontologically privileging that category, intersectionality theorists argue that oppression is produced through the interaction of multiple, decentered, and co-constitutive axes. This controverts orthodox Marxist approaches, for instance, which claim that class has causal and explanatory priority to gender and race, which are viewed as 'epiphenomenal'. For this reason, it is perhaps unsurprising that Marxist feminists were among the first to critique intersectionality (see Gimenez). Irreducibility as an epistemic value refutes the causal or explanatory priority given by certain Marxists (among others) to 'class' or the 'economic base'. A 'hallmark' of intersectionality – as Deborah King argues of Black feminist thought more generally – is '[t]he necessity of addressing all oppressions' (43).

However, while these three analytic benefits are imputed to intersectionality in theory, according to empirical researchers, it is less clear how one ought to go about 'researching' simultaneous oppressions without reducing them to unitary categories or merely reverting to an additive model (Bowleg; Belkhir and Barnett). Through her qualitative and quantitative studies of stress and resilience in Black lesbians in the U.S., Lisa Bowleg found that 'it is virtually impossible, particularly in quantitative research, to ask questions about intersectionality that are not inherently additive' (2). Moreover, Bowleg concluded that 'addition is often a critical step in preliminary analysis': 'isolating' each category and its impact on the subject's experience is 'an essential analytical step [... T]he researcher must analyze each structural inequality separately, as well as simultaneously' (7). Jean Ait Belkhir and Bernice McNair Barnett maintain that '[d]espite the warning to scholars not to isolate race, class, or gender, this is a necessary step to understand the intersectionality in the end' (163–164). We can interpret these methodological prescriptions in light of the irreducibility claim in one of two ways. First, intersectionality may capture the irreducibility of experience to any single category by keeping multiple categories of oppression in play at once. The researcher thereby avoids reducing experiences to a single category of oppression or to two or more axes of oppression that are added together. Second, intersectionality may function less as a research method and more as a heuristic to interpret results of quantitative or qualitative research. On this interpretation, irreducibility is a theoretical commitment on the part of the researcher, which informs her analysis of data that may well have been generated using monistic categories. However, these two interpretations indicate that as a methodological commitment in quantitative and qualitative research, irreducibility may displace simultaneity. At best, simultaneity is a function of an integrative meta-analysis which synthesizes essentially additive data.[6]

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The last benefit attributed to intersectionality is inclusivity. The claim is that as a theoretical paradigm, intersectionality can act as a corrective against the white solipsism, heteronormativity, elitism, and ableism of dominant power and hegemonic feminist theory by making social locations and experiences visible that are occluded in essentialist and exclusionary constructions of the category 'women' (see Spelman). Ange-Marie Hancock argues that intersectional approaches are 'inclusive and incisive' and foster 'deep political solidarity' (Hancock 183). This analytic benefit corresponds to Crenshaw's analysis of political intersectionality, which reveals how transformative social movements have reproduced deeply ingrained cognitive and representational exclusions in the course of political practice.

3. Critical Engagements with Intersectionality

If the 1990s and early 2000s were marked by an enthusiastic uptake of the broad notion of 'intersectionality' (see Garry 494–495), and also arguably, by widespread inattention to the origins, context, and implications of the concept, in the more recent years, intersectionality has come under criticism in feminist theory. It is to a few of those critiques that I now turn, focusing specifically on those which take issue with the four analytic benefits I discussed in the previous section.

Despite intersectionality's analytic promise to capture structural complexity without reducing or fragmenting simultaneous experiences of oppression(s), Alice Ludvig has argued that the fact that the social world is 'insurmountably complex' raises serious problems for intersectionality (247). Ludvig contends that 'the endlessness of differences seems to be a weak point in intersectional theory' (247). On what basis can a judgment be made as to which categories are salient? For instance, Ludvig points out that in daily life, it is often not possible to discern the specific form of categorical prejudice at work in an experience of discrimination: '[s]ubjectively, it is often not possible for a woman to decide whether she has been discriminated against just because of her gender or for another reason such as a foreign accent' (246). Like Ludvig, Shuddhabrata Sengupta argues that the phenomenology of oppression ultimately defies its reduction to 'axes', 'structures', or even 'systems'; the 'algebra of our world' is too irreducibly complex and contradictory, flouting even an approach that aims to capture irreducibility (635). At the very least, Ludvig claims that intersectionality theorists are faced with a definitional problem: '[w]ho defines when, where, which, and why particular differences are given recognition while others are not?' (Ludvig 247). Similarly, Kathryn Russell argues that we lack 'arguments about when and where we can emphasize one factor over another' as well as 'analyses about how gender, race, and class are connected' (35). Russell suggests that '[c]urrent scholarship seems to be caught in a bind between collapsing social categories together and separating them out in a list' (35). Yet precisely this quandary, whether to flatten or fragment social experiences of multiple oppressions, is anticipated in Crenshaw's germinal discussion of intersectionality (*Demarginalizing* 148–149). What this set of criticisms reveals is that the methodological and conceptual challenge that intersectionality presents to categorial essentialism has been side-stepped by much 'intersectional' scholarly research, which assumes the stability and explanatory power of monistic categories even as it explores their permutations and combinations (see Carastathis, *Reinvigorating Intersectionality*). These categories have been defined with the experiences of relatively privileged subgroups as their 'historical base' (Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing* 148). The 'bind' Russell identifies and the definitional problem Ludvig raises for intersectionality presuppose the adequacy of analytic distinctions between systems of oppression and aspects of identity rather than problematizing them. The conflation of 'complexity' and of the 'particular' with multiply oppressed groups (such as 'women with

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a foreign accent'), and the corresponding conflation of 'simplicity' and the 'generic' with (relatively) privileged ones (such as women without an accent marked as foreign) reveals a single-axis framework is assumed.

Another set of critiques concern the scalar reach of intersectionality. There is some debate as to whether intersectionality functions as a micro-, meso-, or macro-level heuristic. Collins distinguishes between the terms 'interlocking' and 'intersectional', taking them to refer, respectively, to macro-level and micro-level phenomena:

> the notion of interlocking oppressions refers to macro level connections linking systems of oppression such as race, class, and gender. This is the model describing the social structures that create social positions. Second, the notion of intersectionality describes micro-level processes – namely, how each individual and group occupies a social position within interlocking structures of oppression described by the metaphor of intersectionality. Together they shape oppression (*Symposium* 492).[7]

Martha Gimenez argues that the model presupposes but does not theorize the relations of micro-level to macro-level phenomena: as a model of identity, she argues that structural intersectionality offers no resources to 'link intersectionality to its macro-level conditions of possibility, those "interlocking" structures of oppression' (29). Taking precisely the opposite view, Dorthe Staunæs interprets intersectionality as a macro-level theory, arguing that it does not illuminate how social categories of gender and race function in the 'lived experience of concrete subjects' and that the model needs to be supplemented with a theory of subjectification (101).

Sherene Razack also asserts that a distinction should be maintained between 'intersecting' and 'interlocking' approaches but not in reference to levels of explanation. She contends that '[a]nalytical tools that consist of looking at how systems of oppression interlock differ in emphasis from those that stress intersectionality. Interlocking systems need one another, and in tracing the complex ways in which they help to secure one another, we learn how women are produced into positions that exist symbiotically but hierarchically' (Razack, *Looking* 13). Unlike Collins, for whom the interlocking/intersecting distinction pertains to the level of analysis to which each is appropriate, for Razack, the key difference lies in the capacity of each heuristic to deal with phenomenological simultaneity and ontological mutual constitution of oppressions. In a more recent essay, Razack reiterates that she prefers

> the word interlocking rather than intersecting to describe how the systems of oppression are connected. Intersecting remains a word that describes discrete systems whose paths cross. I suggest that the systems are each other and that they give content to each other. […] An interlocking approach requires that we keep several balls in the air at once, striving to overcome the successive process forced upon us by language and focusing on the ways in which bodies express social hierarchies of power (Razack, *White Supremacy* 343).

Yet as we have seen, simultaneity and irreducibility – 'keeping several balls in the air at once' – are analytic benefits commonly imputed to intersectionality. Moreover, as Sirma Bilge has shown, mutual constitution is claimed by some intersectional theorists as a premise of that approach as well, although views differ markedly on the ontological implications of that claim (Bilge 63–65). For instance, Ann Garry argues that 'the fact that [oppressions] are enmeshed in people's lives does not necessitate their antecedent conceptual fusion' (840). Nevertheless, the distinction between interlocking and intersectional approaches seems to be a matter of stipulation with little theoretical basis in the existing literature; at present, the distinction lacks supporting arguments needed to sustain it.

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Still another set of critiques of intersectionality involves the aforementioned distinction between intercategorical and intracategorical approaches (McCall). Broadly, the former is concerned with differences between social groups, while the latter is concerned with differences within social groups. Yuval-Davis critiques the intercategorical approach to intersectionality, arguing that '[u]nless it is complemented with an intra-categorical approach, it can be understood as an additive rather than a mutually constitutive approach to the relationship between social categories' (7). For instance, research which assumes the stability, fixity, and homogeneity of social groups can lapse into positivism, adding together monistic categories of identity. Elizabeth Cole makes a compelling argument that a positivist, intercategorical approach to intersectionality, which 'assumes the definition and operationalization of social/structural categories as independent variables', fails to 'address the processes that create and maintain […] the categories' (445).

Finally, a fourth set of criticisms concerns the normative goal of 'inclusion' imputed to intersectionality. Can intersectionality deliver on the promise to transform feminist theory and politics by centering the experiences of multiply oppressed groups? Or does it participate in a 'retrograde' form of identity politics? Drawing on Crenshaw's largely overlooked call at the end of 'Mapping the Margins' to view identity-based groups not as monoliths, but as coalitions, constituted by internal differences as much as by commonalities, Cole suggests that 'although intersectionality may be misconstrued to suggest a politics of identity [of] vanishingly small constituencies, in fact the concept holds the promise of opening new avenues of cooperation' (447; see Crenshaw, *Mapping* 1299). By contrast, Naomi Zack is dubious that intersectionality can deliver on its inclusionary promise. Zack argues that while intersectionality may indeed overcome essentialist constructions of identity, '[p]olitically, it easily leads to a fragmentation of women that precludes common goals as well as basic empathy. The *de facto* racial segregation of both criticism and liberation along the lines of historical oppression sabotages present criticism and future liberation because women of color speak only to themselves' (7). Zack asserts that women of color are only heard in white feminist discourses 'if they are willing to present themselves as representatives of this or that disadvantaged racial or ethnic group – they have lost the ability to speak to and be heard by white women as women' (78). Like a small group of 'post-intersectionality' theorists situated in the legal academy (Ehrenreich; Kwan; Chang and Culp; see also Nash), Zack calls on feminist theory to go 'beyond intersectionality' to achieve a truly 'inclusive feminism'. Although Zack's incisive critique of the abiding racial politics of U.S. feminist discourse is well taken, the tokenism she challenges hardly seems specific to, or inherent in 'intersectionality'. Furthermore, we might question the notion of 'inclusion' – which seems to presuppose the very same asymmetries of power that intersectionality contests – and instead materialize 'coalition' as the normative implication of intersectional analysis (Carastathis, *Identity Categories*).

4. Conclusion

Although I have briefly assessed the relative merits of the aforementioned critiques, it is even more important to note that many critical engagements with 'intersectionality' address the ways in which the concept has traveled into various disciplines, empirical sites, and ideological terrains, rather than Crenshaw's own generative work, or the broader body of integrative scholarship produced by Black feminists. Indeed, many critiques of intersectionality are marked by inattention to Crenshaw's 1989 and 1991 essays, notwithstanding the now-compulsory acknowledgement, often in the form of a single citation, to her work. Moreover, very few (particularly white feminist) authors contextualize intersectionality in a philosophical trajectory

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of Black feminist thought, constructing it, instead, as a historically novel intervention in an ostensibly primary white feminist narrative on oppression. Intersectionality has become an 'institutionalized intellectual project' within feminist theory (Nash 13). Yet, ironically, some deployments of 'intersectionality' may serve to obscure and thereby reproduce the very phenomena intersectionality was conceived to illuminate and overcome. Collins' warning is apposite: '[d]espite the widespread belief that intersectionality has arrived, […] it is important to stop and recognize that this way of looking at and living in the world constitutes a new area of inquiry that is still in its infancy' (*Emergent* vii). If intersectionality is to have a promising future in feminist theory, its intellectual history must be engaged with rigor, integrity, and attentiveness to the theoretical and political aims which originally animated it.

Short Biography

Anna Carastathis is an Assistant Professor of feminist philosophy in the Department of Philosophy at California State University, Los Angeles, where she also teaches in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program. Her research critically examining the concept of intersectionality has been published in the journals *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (in a special issue, 'Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory', edited by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Leslie McCall, and Sumi Cho) and *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* (her article, 'Basements and Intersections', won the journal's inaugural annual Diversity Essay Prize) and in the anthology *Why Race and Gender Still Matter: An Intersectional Approach* (edited by Namita Goswami, Maeve O'Donovan, and Lisa Yount; Pickering and Chatto). Carastathis previously held research and teaching positions at McGill University's Centre for Research and Teaching on Women at Concordia University's Simone de Beauvoir Institute, at the Centre de recherche en éthique de l'Université de Montréal and the University of British Columbia's Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice. She received her PhD in Philosophy from McGill University and her BA (Honors) in Philosophy from the University of Alberta.

Notes

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[1] This list of landmark publications is, admittedly, U.S.-centric (and incomplete). However, as Nira Yuval-Davis points out, the notion of multiple systems of oppression converging in the experiences of minoritized and racialized women was also explored in the 1980s in the British context, notably in the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent and in the work of Floya Anthias and Yuval-Davis (who critiqued OWAAD's 'additive approach') (see Anthias and Yuval-Davis; Yuval-Davis *Intersectionality* 193). In this essay, I focus mostly on the elaboration of intersectionality in Anglo–American feminist theory.

[2] In this essay, I focus narrowly on the concept of intersectionality, not discussing other contemporaneous and apparently related concepts, such as interstices (Spillers), matrix of domination (Collins), or multiple jeopardy (King). While these are often conflated with intersectionality, in my view, they are distinct concepts each deserving of careful philosophical analysis.

[3] However, in Collins' view, Crenshaw's intervention heralded an era of depoliticized intersectional scholarship: 'For me, the 1970s and 1980s were the heady days of intersectional scholarship – *avant la lettre?* – a time when the critical analytical lens of intersectionality was attuned to assessing significant social issues, thinking through the mechanisms of intersecting systems of power themselves and/or trying to do something about social inequalities. Ironically, some view Crenshaw's 1991 piece coining the term 'intersectionality' as intersectionality's coming of age, yet this moment can also be interpreted as launching a decade where the initial vision of intersectionality became increasingly drowned out…' (*Emerging* ix).

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[4] Notably, intersectionality (as Crenshaw and earlier Black feminist intellectuals parse it) is a critique of solipsism, tokenism, and exclusion in both white-dominated feminist political discourses and male-dominated antiracist ones (such as Black nationalism). Given its emphasis on the elaboration of intersectionality within feminist theory, this essay addresses the first prong of intersectionality's twofold critique.

[5] Sociologists analytically distinguish between three levels of social reality: the micro-level refers to individual and intersubjective experience, the meso-level refers to social group memberships based on shared social locations constructed by historical experiences and asymmetrical power relations, and the macro-level refers to structures of oppression which are enacted and reproduced through institutions.

[6] It is beyond the scope of this essay to 'settle' complex methodological questions which remain indeterminate in the literature. However, based on a close reading of Crenshaw (*Mapping* 1244–1245 n9), elsewhere I articulate the view that intersectionality is a 'provisional concept' that has as its *goal* the development of a truly integrative methodology which would fuse what are now falsely separated as mutually exclusive categories; however, intersectionality is not, *itself*, that methodology (Carastathis, *Reinvigorating Intersectionality*).

[7] However, Collins seems to discard this distinction in the later work, where she uses 'intersectionality' to refer to all three analytic levels of social reality (*Some Group Matters*; *It's All in the Family*).

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