

# Intersectionality and its discontents: Intersectionality as traveling theory

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**Abstract**

'Intersectionality' has now become a major feature of feminist scholarly work, despite continued debates surrounding its precise definition. Since the term was coined and the field established in the late 1980s, countless articles, volumes and conferences have grown out of it, heralding a new phase in feminist and gender studies. Over the past few years, however, the growing number of critiques leveled against intersectionality warrants us as feminists to pause and reflect on the trajectory the concept has taken and on the ways in which it has traveled through time and space. Conceptualizing intersectionality as a traveling theory allows for these multiple critiques to be contextualized and addressed. It is argued that the context of the neoliberal academy plays a major role in the ways in which intersectionality has lost much of its critical potential in some of its usages today. It is further suggested that Marxist feminism(s) offers an important means of grounding intersectionality critically and expanding intersectionality's ability to engage with feminism transnationally.

**Keywords**

Feminism, gender, intersectionality, Marxism, materialism, transnationalism, traveling theory

**Introduction**

Sometimes the governing paradigms which have structured all our lives are so powerful that we can think we are doing progressive work when in fact we are reinforcing the paradigms. (Grillo, 1995: 16)

Intersectionality has now become a major feature of feminist scholarly work, despite continued debates surrounding its precise definition. Since the term was coined and the

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field established in the late 1980s, countless articles, volumes and conferences have grown out of it, heralding a new phase in feminist and gender studies. Over the past few years, however, the increasing number of critiques of intersectionality invites us as feminists to pause and reflect on the term, its genealogy, and its future. Numerous feminists, for example, have posited the question of how intersectional theorists deal with imperialism and the transnational (Spivak, cited in Edkins and Vaughan-Williams, 2009; Patil, 2013). Poststructuralists have raised questions about the nature of the subject vis-a-vis intersectional research (Butler, 1989: 143), and critical race theorists have focused on the problematic ways in which some intersectional work addresses race (Nash, 2008). These criticisms raise concerns about the obliteration of intersectionality's radical beginnings, the stretching of intersectionality so that it becomes a 'catch-all' feminist theory that can be used by all feminists, and the sanitizing of intersectionality by liberal feminism. Myra Marx Ferree has noted, 'The idea of intersectionality as a moment of resistance to the mainstream erasure of inequalities has been converted into the idea of "diversity" understood as a positive, albeit neoliberal, approach to social inclusion' (2013). It is this supposed shift that I want to trace in this article: from intersectionality as a moment of resistance to intersectionality as a neoliberal approach that erases inequality. Authors who criticize this shift posit that although intersectionality was envisioned as a radical critique of liberal feminism,<sup>1</sup> its usage by a wide spectrum of feminists pursuing very different theoretical and political projects today appears to indicate that the concept has become more elastic than perhaps originally intended. This elasticity, critics posit, functions to deflect attention away from important questions about what intersectionality is and whether it has been co-opted by liberal feminism via the neoliberal academy.

In order to unpack some of the questions regarding the trajectory of intersectionality, this article brings some of the more prominent critiques of intersectionality in conversation with one another, arguing that the genealogy of the concept raises questions about the broader field of feminist studies and indeed feminist movements in general. Specifically, the article focuses on feminists working within postcolonialism, poststructuralism, critical race studies and Marxism, arguing that these critics raise important points about the trajectory of intersectionality. Because poststructuralism and postmodernism have been in vogue for the past two decades, Marxist feminist critiques have not received as much attention and it is for this reason that I focus on this strand of feminist theorizing, to show the ways in which some Marxist feminist critiques can recover the critical potential of intersectionality – especially for feminists working in the Global South – because of its focus on specific analytical concepts such as the nation state and global division of labor. This is not to say that all work using intersectionality has been co-opted, nor that Marxist feminism is the only way to affirm the radical nature of intersectionality; rather my aim is to start a discussion around what has happened to the concept as it has traveled into the mainstream.

I use the concept of a traveling theory (Said, 1983) to set the stage for this discussion, arguing that tracing the ways intersectionality has traveled can shed light on the critiques now being made against it. I ask: what has happened to intersectionality as it has crossed time and space, and first moved from Black and Third World<sup>2</sup> feminism to feminism as a whole, and then from feminism in the Global South to feminism in the Global North. It is crucial to note that intersectionality's travels point to the power of the concept itself, to

the ‘generative capacity of theory making that comes from the margins’, as Gail Lewis has noted (2013: 871). 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.

I begin the article by tracing the beginnings of intersectionality and the debates surrounding its definition and application, in order to present the first line of critique, namely that intersectionality’s critical roots have been erased as it has moved from Black feminism and Third World feminism to other contexts. This serves to reconstruct intersectionality as a ‘catch-all’ approach. The second section looks at Marxist feminist engagements with intersectionality and argues that current Marxist feminist theorizing provides a useful means through which intersectionality’s critical potential can be regained. Specifically, I argue that the focus on questions of capitalism, imperialism, and broader structures and power relations is something connecting Marxist feminist approaches to the early theorizations and applications of intersectionality. These features make Marxist feminism a particularly useful approach for feminists working in the Global South. The final part of the article looks at the neoliberal academy as a key mechanism through which the changes in intersectionality’s application can be traced. It is the changing nature of the academy and its facilitation of intersectionality’s travels that can partly explain the proliferation of applications of intersectionality that neutralize the critical potential inherent in the concept. I conclude by revisiting the concept of traveling theory and the ways in which feminist work from the Global South can work in ways that re-center intersectionality’s radical roots.

## Intersectionality’s beginnings

The debate surrounding what intersectionality is has now continued without an end in sight for over two decades. Some have celebrated intersectionality as a theory, even a grand or meta-theory (Davis, 2008) while others have emphasized that it is a metaphor (Crenshaw, 1991). Some of those advocating for intersectionality-as-theory have even gone so far as to argue that it represents a new paradigm for the ‘scientific community’ and have therefore envisioned it as a positivist approach (Walgenbach, 2010). The lack of a methodology when it comes to intersectionality has been alternately celebrated and critiqued. Jennifer Nash (2008) has correctly pointed out that ambiguity surrounding methodological questions – in order to be as inclusive as possible – can lead to further problems. Furthermore, the focus on categories can sometimes make it difficult to theorize the relationality between these categories (Erel et al., 2010: 64).

Others have argued more recently that we should not spend time debating what intersectionality *is* but rather focus on what it *does* – in other words, focus on its intentionality and performativity (Cho et al., 2013). Indeed this focus on performativity may be especially useful in addressing some of the problems with intersectionality today. As Sara Ahmed (2007) has noted, concepts and theories do not always perform in the ways in which they claim to perform, and understanding this non-performativity is as important as understanding performativity. Moreover, Ahmed points out that claims to ‘being

critical' should always be probed, as a claim does not replace the act of critique itself. If we were to adopt this approach, then it becomes even more necessary to question what is being done in the name of intersectionality today. Although intersectionality emerged from the Black feminist traditions and Third World Liberation movements, it has increasingly been represented as having emerged from within the field of gender studies in the North. This critique has been made prominent by Sirma Bilge (2013) as well as Sara Carbin and Maria Edenheim (2013), who identify themselves as poststructuralists.

Claims about beginnings are claims to power, as Michel Foucault (1970 [1966]) has reminded us. Placing intersectionality's beginnings within gender studies has in effect meant that intersectionality has been 'whitened' and claimed for the academy, erasing intersectionality's beginnings in Black feminist histories and Third World Liberation movements, that is, erasing its articulations outside of the academy. One example is the claim by Nina Lykke, among others, who argued that European feminists were already engaging in intersectional research in the 1970s (2005).<sup>3</sup> Another is the conference on intersectionality held in Frankfurt in 2009, which has been cited as a space in which liberal co-optations of intersectionality were especially clear, particularly with regard to European feminists claiming that intersectionality was already present in their work before it emerged in Black feminism (Lewis, 2009).

Sirma Bilge notes that attempts to reformulate genealogies are never innocent and always political: 'Hierarchies are created when one establishes whose texts are deemed foundational and included in the translated "canon"; who gets invited to major scientific events where the new knowledge product is launched and confronted by local expertise, who is side-lined; who is empowered by this introduction, and who is not' (2013: 407). Understanding these debates surrounding the origins of intersectionality is thus one way of understanding the various conflicts present within the field of feminist studies and within feminist movements as a whole.

This line of critique further posits that intersectionality has now become one of the dominant ways of doing feminist research, and in that process has been stretched to include many different ontologies that are often in conflict with one another. The supposed consensus surrounding intersectionality functions to hide these conflicts, however, and represents a liberal move to sanitize the various approaches to feminism and present feminism as a field that is simply 'diverse', rather than (also) conflictual. Indeed, this is the crux of the argument: that intersectionality has been impacted by the move within neoliberalism to speak of 'diversity' or even inequality instead of power relations or domination.<sup>4</sup> It is these moves to stretch intersectionality and make it an approach that fits all feminist ontologies that has undermined its radical potential. Precisely because conflicting approaches use intersectionality, and precisely because intersectionality works to hide these conflicts, feminism ends up being presented as a field devoid of power relations, a field of 'diversity'. This goes against intersectionality's radical beginnings, where these conflicts and divisions were made central to feminist analysis, and where power relations – particularly with regard to race and class – were not swept under the carpet but brought to the center. This is not to say that all scholars using intersectionality shy away from discussing power relations, but rather to trace the fact that a rising number of scholars who use intersectionality do so by referencing a different language.

Another important aspect of the argument – that intersectionality did not emerge from Black feminism because it was ‘already in the air’ – functions as an erasure of race. As Crenshaw argues: ‘There is a sense that efforts to repackage intersectionality for universal consumption require a re-marginalizing of black women’ (2011: 224). While one could perhaps make the argument that intersectionality was ‘in the air’ by referencing the *praxis* of Third World Liberation women who spoke of ‘triple oppression’ or ‘triple jeopardy’, it would be difficult to make this argument in reference to liberal feminism, which has often been critiqued for ignoring questions of race, class and sexuality, to mention a few. Indeed, intersectionality emerged in the North as a response and challenge from Black and Third World feminists to Northern feminist theorizing that was Eurocentric and centered around the experiences of white, middle-class women. It is thus ironic to locate intersectionality’s beginnings within a field such as liberal feminism, as Lykke (2005) does. Bilge (2013) and Carbin and Edenheim (2013) have brought attention to this appropriation, and by articulating a different history of intersectionality have re-centered questions of race and class, making them once again central to intersectional analysis. In addition, Black feminists<sup>5</sup> have articulated the claim that race is a structure that organizes people globally, not simply an element that is sometimes relevant and other times invisibilized.<sup>6</sup>

Understanding how the erasure of race occurs can be done through tracing the ways in which intersectionality has traveled, first from Black women’s history and Black feminism to feminism in general, and then from feminism in the Global South to the Global North. Even to claim that intersectionality emerged from the Global North ignores the fact that it initially emerged from the marginalized Black women’s groups within the US context, and that it did not travel to Europe as seamlessly as imagined. In an article on the question of intersectionality and its depoliticization, Erel et al. argue that intersectionality’s critical potential has been diminished precisely because of its traveling to new contexts, in this instance Britain and Germany, particularly because there was a tendency to ‘disavow the roots of the concept in anti-racist struggles’ (2010: 57). Moreover, where the concept of intersectionality is used and race is included as an intersection, the *understanding* of race can often be Eurocentric and thus exclusionary (2010: 57). Erel et al. argue that in the German academic context, contributions by ‘women of color’ and ‘migrant women’ to feminism have been silenced: ‘Intersectionality here risks being reduced to a fashionable term that allows some people the power to define while avoiding the re-distribution of discursive and material power. This is what we think is happening with the reception of intersectionality debates in the German context’ (2010: 62).

When intersectionality moves to different parts of the globe, the question of Eurocentrism becomes even more pertinent. Vrushali Patil has pointed out that the race–class–gender axis has different meanings depending on the context, and this affects the ability of the concept to travel without mutation. She writes: ‘Applications of intersectionality continue to be shaped by the geographies of colonial modernity’ (2013: 853). The international division of labor, colonialism, nationalism and global and local forms of patriarchy are questions that should be central, but often are not.

In sum this line of critique brings together some concerns with the way in which intersectionality has been co-opted by certain strands of liberal feminism that have historically been averse to articulating race, class and other social categories that divide

women's experiences. While intersectionality's origins lie in Black feminist struggles and studies and Third World Liberation movements, the concept has slowly moved away from these radical beginnings and become a 'catch-all' approach used by feminists coming from very different ontological and epistemological positions. This pluralism serves to erase the critical potential of intersectionality rather than enhance it. Through an articulation of intersectionality's genealogy it becomes possible to reclaim its radical beginnings in order to bring questions of race, class, sexuality, and so on, back to the center of analysis.

## Marxist feminism and intersectionality

In this section I argue that while intersectionality initially posed an important critique of Marxist feminists that were economically reductionist by showing that gender, race and other categories are not secondary but primary alongside class, as it has traveled intersectionality has increasingly been used in a depoliticized manner. For this reason, a Marxist feminism that takes into account intersectionality's initial point about the primacy of multiple social categories poses one important way of deploying intersectional analysis and taking it further by showing *how* these categories are created, how they exploit and not simply oppress, and *why* they intersect. The Marxist feminist work cited in this section thus both brings us back to intersectionality's critical intervention *and* takes us past it by explaining the 'why' questions.

There are important differences in the ways Marxist feminists approach analysis and theory, and it is impossible to specify one Marxist feminist approach per se. Indeed it is important to note that there are strands of Marxist feminism that engage in a form of economic reductionism that sees race, gender, sexuality and nation as secondary to class, which is a problematic view that has been critiqued extensively.<sup>7</sup> Therefore in this section I focus on those Marxist feminists who have specifically addressed the question of intersectionality and thus when I speak of Marxist feminism in the remainder of the article I am referring to this strand. I argue that these approaches are better able to conceptualize the complexity of social relations, to address the question of material oppression, to take the international context into account as part and parcel of analysis, and finally to withstand co-optations that render analysis neoliberal-friendly.

This approach grounds analysis within a material framing that looks at capital and production, as well as dialectical relations between capitalism, gender, race and other social categories. This is done by drawing on contemporary theoretical and analytical moves within Marxism to complicate the notion of production and reproduction of social relations. The point is to move away from questions such as the one posed by Catherine MacKinnon (1982: 517): 'Is male dominance a creation of capitalism or is capitalism one expression of male dominance?' This represents a move away from Marxist feminist work that focused on 'dual systems' – patriarchy and capitalism – and therefore neglected race, sexuality and other social relations of power.<sup>8</sup> More contemporary analyses conceptualize class as *co-constitutive* of race, gender and other social categories so that none of those can be spoken about as a completely separate category. At the same time, the analysis must be grounded in the context we are contemporarily in: capitalism. This grounding, however, must take into account that capitalism articulates itself differently depending on

the particular social settings, and is thus not universal; its organization and effects are not uniform. This conceptualization builds on the more recent work in Marxism that argues against the economism of orthodox Marxism and instead defines class, production and capital more expansively, thus making it possible to understand class, gender, race and so on as part and parcel of experience. Production here is conceptualized not simply as producing material life and property but also producing social relations, values, norms and dispositions.

Struggles against capitalist exploitation are also a means through which transnational solidarity can be fostered. Moreover, attention to capitalism emphasizes the usefulness of a Marxist framework in addressing intersections of social categories of gender, class and race, and thus may be a way of returning to intersectionality's critical beginnings. Bhandar writes, 'As an additive to Marxist theory, intersectionality leads the way toward a much higher level of understanding the character of oppression than that developed by classical Marxists' (2013). Eve Mitchell, agreeing with Sharon Smith, emphasizes that the problem with the current use of intersectionality is that it is incomplete and therefore functions as a bourgeois ideology that prevents us from understanding identity as a form of alienation (2013). Moreover, she argues that the focus on identity or the intersections of identity means that we are focusing on the particular and ignoring the universality of the capitalist mode of production. Postcolonial feminists, in particular, have been successful in adopting a transnational lens that addresses the ways in which imperialism and colonialism have organized capitalism, and how they all rely on and articulate specific gender relations.

Returning to the question of genealogy, it is important to note that the work of Black feminist Marxists in particular acted as a useful corrective to the simplistic conceptualizations of exploitation found in some orthodox Marxist work, and provided excellent examples of the type of work that draws on a materialist understanding of gender. One notable example here is the Combahee River Collective that in 1977 stated that although they aligned themselves with Marx, they saw the need for an analysis that could be extended further to take into consideration their specific condition as Black women. Indeed, in the United States from the early 1920s until the late 1980s, there was a vast array of scholarship being produced by Black feminists who explicitly aligned themselves with Marxism.<sup>9</sup> This work, however, is not often included in the intersectionality canon. This is precisely what made intersectionality a critical intervention that resisted power. However, once the concept traveled to multiple locations, this critical potential began to erode.

Feminists working within the Marxist tradition tend to look at the ways in which social relations (including race and gender) are co-constitutive and how are they tied to production.<sup>10</sup> This serves as one way forward when it comes to the question of approaching gender in an intersectional manner. While some Marxist feminists, such as Brenna Bhandar (2013), believe intersectionality has run its course and in fact was never a radical project to begin with, others have argued for its continued usefulness for Marxist feminist approaches. Sharon Smith, for example, has argued that intersectionality cannot replace Marxist approaches to gender because intersectionality is an approach that helps us understand oppression but not exploitation (2013–2014). In order to understand exploitation, and connections between different forms of exploitation, we need to locate

these within capitalism – and this is what Marxist feminism does. Marxist feminism offers a means through which we can explain *why* different categories intersect and how they came about in the first place. As Sara Farris notes, while intersectionality has helped Marxist feminism see that it is not all about class, Marxist feminism can in turn help intersectionality *explain* why these intersections happen (2014). This can be done by analyzing the root causes of exploitation using a methodology that is historical and materialist.

The argument that capitalism requires gender inequality is one that has been made by Marxist feminists for decades (Arruzza, 2014). A notable example of an argument in this vein is social reproduction theory, which posits that gender is constitutive of capitalism, not an accidental by-product. As Maria Dalla Costa has noted, ‘The housewife and her labour are not outside the process of surplus value production, but constitute the very foundation upon which this process can get started’ (cited in Mies, 1998: 31). Here we see a historicizing of gender relations through capitalism to demonstrate precisely how women are not only affected but constituted through a whole range of structures. At the same time, to avoid economic reductionism, this type of argument can be pushed further through an intersectional lens by asking the question: which women are affected in which ways? It is this type of question that a Marxist feminism that is aware of the intersections of multiple categories would ask, and I turn to this next.

In order to provide a more substantive look into Marxist feminist theorizing that looks at race, nation, gender and imperialism within capitalism, I turn to both Black Marxist feminists as well as feminists from the Global South. Black Marxist feminists such as Claudia Jones and those within the Combahee River Collective saw Marxism as an important tool in understanding reality, but pointed to the central role of race and racism in capitalist development. Such work looked at ways, for example, in which the transatlantic slave trade developed capitalism in specific ways and allowed it to expand dramatically, showing that race and racism are not simply by-products of capitalism, or secondary contradictions, but are integral to the workings of capitalism itself. This provides us with an analysis of how the category of race expanded under slavery, and how this was related to capitalist expansion. Such an analysis also demonstrates a lens that is both Marxist and intersectional. Gender, race and class all intersect in such an analysis; but each category is also located historically and materially. Importantly, these concepts are grounded in materiality.

Marxist feminist Selma James has spoken about the ways in which we can understand various forms of oppression, such as race, while keeping the capitalist system as the underlying context by understanding ‘culture’ in a particular way:

To delimit culture is to reduce it to a decoration of daily life. Culture is plays and poetry about the exploited; ceasing to wear mini-skirts and taking to trousers instead. Culture is also the shrill of the alarm clock that rings at 6 a.m. when a Black woman in London wakes her children to get them ready for the baby-minder. Culture is how cold she feels at the bus stop and then how hot in the crowded bus. (James and Beese, 1975: 5)

This paragraph shows again the intersection of various categories, including race, gender and class, which are brought together using the concept of culture understood expansively.



This type of work therefore is both intersectional and deploys a Marxist approach to understanding the intersections.

Capitalism, imperialism and gender are of particular importance given their global reach, and the work of Marxist feminist Silvia Federici has attempted to flesh out the relations between them by focusing on capitalism as a transnational system that includes the Global South as a key element within this system. Her work on how organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank have used notions of 'gender equality' to deepen austerity measures is crucial to many contexts in the Global South. She writes, 'If it has not been more apparent in our lifetimes, at least in many parts of the Global North, it is because the "human catastrophes" [capitalist accumulation] has caused have been most often externalized, confined to the colonies, and rationalized as effects of cultural backwardness or attachment to misguided traditions and "tribalism" ' (Federici, 2012: 104). Capitalist accumulation affects the Global South in particular ways that then reproduce different forms of gender relations; it is precisely this that Federici tackles in her work that brings together Marxist feminism and the intersections of capital, imperialism, gender and race.

Feminists who focus on class analysis in the Global South have also produced work that has pointed to the central role of colonialism and imperialism in capitalist development, and how these two processes have used race, nation and gender to produce specific class structures. For these feminists, imperialism is not peripheral to capitalism but constitutive of it. These feminists, like Black feminists, thus posed a double critique: on the one hand, a critique of a feminism that saw gender as the main source of oppression for women universally; and on the other hand, a critique of a Marxism that saw imperialism and colonialism – and by extension race and nation – as peripheral to the capitalist system and its expansion and development. Here the work of Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak is especially noteworthy, as well as that of Nadje al-Ali (2005) and Leila Ahmed (1982, 1992).

What is at stake here is not just feminist analysis, but also a form of feminist solidarity through material conditions. It is the production and reproduction of our material conditions and the ways in which this creates social categories that are our commonality, even as the specific mechanisms through which this happens have different particularities. Indeed, I would argue that this form of solidarity presents us with a more concrete way of organizing transnationally than solidarity that is solely based on gender. This has been made particularly clear following the process of decolonization where forces of nationalism and class were instrumental in creating solidarities between, and beyond feminist movements. Moreover, the international division of labor today represents another way in which solidarity based on a universal womanhood is impossible, because of the ways in which women living in the conditions of the Global North are often able to achieve a high standard of living because of the exploitation of both women and men in the Global South.

## **Neoliberalism as the context**

One way of bringing together critiques of the appropriation of intersectionality as it has traveled and the potential of Marxist feminist contribution to reclaiming intersectionality's

radical roots is by addressing the question of the context of contemporary feminist production of knowledge: the neoliberalization of the academy. Intersectionality emerged in a moment when radical political activism was having ripple effects throughout the academy. As Delia Aguilar has noted, 'Confining intersectionality's inception to an already professionalized feminism erases the historical fact that its conceptualization was actually honed in the intensity of revolutionary struggle by women-of-colour organizations' (2012). Indeed the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the US are key to understanding the evolution of intersectionality.

Any discussions on the current status of intersectionality should take into account the context of the neoliberal academy. This is not to reproduce the false dichotomy between theory and praxis, or the academy and activism, but rather to bring attention to the ways in which intersectionality debates within the academy are shaped by neoliberalism. Indeed, I argue that this context of neoliberalism can largely explain the process of co-optation of radical traits of intersectionality and other critical concepts within feminism. Such co-optations occur because of specific mechanisms within knowledge production that serve to curb critical scholarship (Fraser, 2006, 2007). Indeed this question is central to any discussion of intersectionality in particular and feminism in general: can we understand intersectionality as another example of co-optation, and if so, how can such co-optations be prevented? If it is the case that each critical intervention within the field of feminism can be or is co-opted and sanitized, then it becomes imperative that the mechanisms enabling co-optation are scrutinized. This would necessitate a genealogical analysis of the mechanisms used by centers of knowledge production to discipline and deradicalize forms of knowledge that are threatening to Eurocentric and neoliberal forms of knowledge production.

Carbin and Edenheim refer to the context of the academy in their brief discussion on the institutionalization of intersectionality: 'Intersectionality is well on its way to become institutionalized and included in the ongoing bureaucratization of politics' (2013: 234). Bilge probes deeper, by analyzing the neoliberal conditions that brought about this shift from intersectionality as a radical ontology to intersectionality as a liberal academic approach to gender:

Neoliberal assumptions create the conditions allowing the founding conceptions of intersectionality to become diluted, disciplined, and disarticulated. ... A depoliticized intersectionality is particularly useful to a neoliberalism that reframes all values as market values: identity-based radical politics are often turned into corporatized diversity tools leveraged by dominant groups to attain various ideological and institutional goals; a range of minority struggles are incorporated into a market-driven and state-sanctioned governmentality of diversity; 'diversity' becomes a feature of neoliberal management, providing 'managerial precepts of good government and efficient business operations'; knowledge of 'diversity' can be presented as marketable expertise in understanding and deploying multiple forms of difference simultaneously – a sought-after signifier of sound judgment and professionalism. (Bilge, 2013: 407)

In an important text on neoliberalism and the academy, Chandra Mohanty (2013) makes the persuasive argument that the intersection of postmodernism, feminism and intersectionality has had negative effects on gender scholarship. A call for fluidity and nuance alongside an aversion to systematic analysis marks much postmodern feminist scholarship,

leading Mohanty to argue that this has damaged the feminist cause because it leaves global power structures out of the analysis. The role of neoliberalism in this is clear, as it favors analyses focused on the individual at the expense of structures. Mohanty asks (2013: 971): 'What happens to the key feminist construct of "the personal is political" when the political (the collective public domain of politics) is reduced to the personal?' Mohanty brings in a materialist analysis when she points out that the representational politics of gender, class, race and so on are detached from their materialist underpinnings and difference is thereby flattened (2013: 972). Nancy Fraser has also made an important intervention that points to the ways in which liberal feminism has acted as 'capitalism's handmaiden' (2013).

Here Marxist feminist critique is particularly useful, as it provides tools with which to analyze the neoliberalization of the academy, the effects of this on feminist studies, and the ways in which this is related to the decline in radical social movements across the globe. Delia Aguilar (2012), for example, has noted that changes in feminist studies are bound to mirror changes within the wider academy. She points out that after the 1980s, there was a change in the work that addressed questions of gender, race and class: 'The view that a meaningful exposition of their interaction demands an understanding of capitalist operations was soon to be swept away by the collapse of social movements and the onset of conservatism.' She speaks of feminists who discuss class as one of the 'intersections' in their analysis, but define it as designating income and occupation rather than placing it within the social relations of production: 'At this point, we have effectively moved to the realm of discourse with less and less material anchor' (Aguilar, 2012).

The questions raised by the various critiques of intersectionality are therefore intricately tied to the question of neoliberalization and the effects this is having on the production of feminist knowledge. Why did intersectionality fail to resist the encroachment of neoliberalization within the academy, while Marxist feminism(s) did? What are the potentials for co-optation within specific strands of theorizing? The resistance to neoliberal co-optation of Marxist feminism leads me to argue that it is Marxist feminism(s) that could provide a way of countering the neoliberalization of feminist theorizing and feminist academia by helping us return to intersectionality's critical origins. This is of particular importance to feminists working on and in the Global South, where neoliberalization has had the most dramatic effects. Marxist interventions coming from the Global South have brought critical attention to the Eurocentrism present in orthodox Marxism, and have instead sought to use the theoretical precepts of Marxism from a postcolonial perspective.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in such a Marxist analysis, capitalism is not an intersection but the *context* within which social categories such as gender, class, sexuality and race are constituted, and this context itself is analyzed as constituted by these categories. It is also the context within which we can analyze how specific categories and concepts are shunned and denied legibility and addressability.

This is where some of the limitations of intersectionality's current uses become especially clear. The claim that the concept originated from within liberal feminism displays a lack of awareness about intersectionality's roots in Black feminism and Third World Liberation movements, and thus renders some usages of intersectionality today unable to productively analyze relations between the North and South. In other words, the transnational geopolitical dimension is often absent or not thoroughly theorized, indicating what kind of audience is being imagined by the author. This is where Marxism as articulated

by theorists from the Global South can be of help, as these articulations have quite thoroughly conceptualized ways of addressing these transnational geopolitical relationships. Some key points here include the ways in which the state and nationalism are theorized, the ways in which imperialism is made part of the analysis, and the ways in which all political and economic processes are approached as gendered, as well as racialized, sexualized and marked by class relations. This cannot be done simply by foregrounding women's (and men's) experiences, but we must go deeper by grounding these experiences in the transnational capitalist system, specifically through a focus on the effects of neoliberalization. In other words, contextualizing social categories within capitalist relations – which created the neoliberal academy – has meant that Marxism contains and foregrounds a critique of neoliberalism in itself, and this may be why it has been less vulnerable to co-optation via the neoliberalization of the academy.

## **Conclusion**

Edward Said returned to his original thesis on traveling theory (Said, 2001), this time articulating a different possibility: that as theories travel, they not only lose their radical edges, but also may fulfill a more radical potential (Carbado, 2013: 812). I have argued that Marxist approaches to feminism coming from the Global South are one way of fulfilling the radical potential inherent in intersectionality, as it travels across the globe, and therefore one way of recapturing the critical potential that was present when intersectionality emerged from Black feminist struggles and studies and the Third World Liberation movements.

The increasing number of criticisms leveled against intersectionality should prompt us to engage in a discussion on the genealogy and trajectory of the approach and the many ways in which it is being utilized today. According to the criticism, intersectionality has become a catch-all approach that has been co-opted by liberal feminism for the purpose of identity politics, under the guise of being a critical gender approach. It is important to remember that within studies of identity and identity politics social identities are seen as intersecting and as reinforcing one another. However, this view does not often extend into an analysis of structural inequalities and power relations nor does it identify capitalism as the context in which these social identities are constituted. This is because identity is often theorized as result of 'diversity', as outside of, or pre-existing power, and is not grounded in materiality.

Richard Seymour has argued that intersectionality is ultimately a way of posing a theoretical problem and not a theoretical solution, and its usefulness depends on the wider theoretical articulations the concept is embedded in (2013). When some of those wider theoretical articulations are neoliberal, so will be the concept of intersectionality. I believe this is a useful point to keep in mind during any discussions on the current state of feminist thinking about intersectionality. This is also why Marxist feminist approaches are particularly useful as an intervention against the neoliberal co-optation of intersectionality. Variations of Marxist feminism from the Global South bring attention to how class, gender, race and other social relations are not just inseparable but are also intricately tied to the global geopolitical power relations. These approaches that focus on materiality and global imperialist and capitalist structures have the potential to go beyond intersectionality in its

liberal variation because they not only identify the intersections of social categories but also provide an analysis of how these marginalizations developed historically and therefore how they can be dismantled. As Seymour notes, what is needed is a theoretical solution that has an element of *praxis* (2013). Erel et al. have posed this problem by emphasizing the context: “Intersectionality” can be a descriptive formula whose analytical value is only realised by embedding it in an anti-racist, post-colonial critical context. Thus an analysis that is critical of power relations appears to us as the precondition for understanding the effects, relationships and interdependencies of power and domination’ (2010: 64). Here again, it seems, Marxist feminism is particularly useful.

Bringing together different lines of critique of intersectionality in order to highlight some of the blind spots in the way it is being used today can help feminists engage in a discussion on the genealogy and trajectory of the concept, as well as its future. It also raises questions about what happens when feminist theories travel, and how this is related to capitalist and imperialist structures that condition today’s knowledge production. This has wider ramifications for feminist studies as a whole. The question of power and exclusion has been central to feminist scholarship since its inception. As feminists we must consistently be conscious of how we draw lines of inclusion and exclusion in our work and activism, and how we use specific concepts to include/exclude. Intersectionality can be an extremely useful concept if it addresses relationships of power. But in order for this to be the case, we need to take seriously critiques against its appropriation within neoliberal feminist academia.

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### **Notes**

1. I use the following definition of liberal feminism: a strand of feminist theorizing that focuses on achieving equality in certain domains of society, notably through legal reforms. It can be seen as focused on the individual’s attainment of rights and the eventual goal of providing all women with freedom of choice.
2. I use the terms Third World, as well as Global North/Global South, following the chronologies of their use in (feminist) scholarship. In the 1980s, when the concept of intersectionality

- appeared, what is now called South, was called Third World. The concepts of Global North/ Global South are more recent.
3. On the question of intersectionality being presented as having emerged from within gender studies, see: Haritaworn (2012), Lewis (2009, 2013), Petzen (2012), Tomlinson (2013).
  4. For an excellent discussion of this shift see: Wendy Brown (1995).
  5. See: Angela Davis (2011), Patricia Hill Collins (2002).
  6. Here however it is important to note postcolonial critiques that transnationalism is often ignored by intersectionality theorists in the North, as well as the poignantly made counter-critique that postcolonial theorists often over-emphasize the transnational at the expense of the national (Lazarus, 1999, 2011).
  7. See in particular: Cinzia Arruzza (2014) and Sara Farris (2014).
  8. Indeed, the debates within Marxist feminism over dual systems theory were so extensive that the field itself suffered greatly. For an overview, see: Barrett (2014).
  9. The most famous example is probably Angela Davis. Another notable example is the Black Panther Party, a party that identified with communism, which also included numerous women who worked on questions of gender, race and communism.
  10. For an excellent roundtable on Marxism and feminism, see: [viewpointmag.com/2015/05/04/gender-and-capitalism-debating-cinzia-arruzzas-remarks-on-gender/](http://viewpointmag.com/2015/05/04/gender-and-capitalism-debating-cinzia-arruzzas-remarks-on-gender/)
  11. See in particular: Amin (1977, 1980).

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