

FRAMING INTERSECTIONALITY

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Intersectionality is a term that arose within the black feminist intellectual tradition for the purposes of identifying interlocking systems of oppression. As a descriptive term, it refers to the ways human identity is shaped by multiple social vectors and overlapping identity categories (such as sex, race, class) that may not be readily visible in single-axis formulations of identity, but which are taken to be integral to robustly capture the multifaceted nature of human experience. As a diagnostic term, it captures the confluence of power and domination on the social construction of identity in order to remedy concrete harms that result from this convergence. It is not a prescriptive methodology or closed system of analysis, but rather an open-ended hermeneutic lens through which interconnected systems of oppression can come into focus in the fight for social justice.

For decades intersectionality has taken pride of place in feminist theories that focus on power and social inequality, as it points to the ways the relative invisibility of a social location or speaking position can produce real-world harms and further stratify (even redouble) inequities for historically marginalized populations like women of color. It has also become the dominant metaphor for talking about complex identities and conceptualizing alternatives to monistic models of selfhood. In time, intersectionality even gained enough citational force to be lauded as “the most important contribution that women’s studies has made so far” (McCall 2005: 1771). This chapter explores the strengths and limitations of the intersectionality paradigm by surveying the academic history of the concept. I argue intersectional social theory is an important analytic tool for disassembling the systematicity of oppression faced by women and girls in the global South, but not in its current academic coinage.

The academization of intersectionality, like that of many advocacy strategies for historically marginalized communities, has been largely based on Anglo-normative interpretive concerns and disciplinary projects rather than the discursive lifeworld and historical realities of people of color. This suggests that the limitations of the intersectionality paradigm come, in large part, from the disciplinary appropriations of intersectionality, as academization created a much weaker version of the concept that operates under the purview of theoretical goals and projects that are altogether different from those built into its design. I call this latter version “operative intersectionality” to distinguish it from the strain black feminists devised as an advocacy strategy to diagnose and combat interlocking systems of oppression. Because operative intersectionality is

primarily responsive to questions based on metaphysical concerns and identity-based philosophical models of selfhood, it needs to be decolonized to better meet the advocacy needs of today's global feminisms. This entails a genealogical return to the socio-political features of early intersectional thought, as conceived by black feminists. I conclude by noting that criticisms of intersectionality are largely criticisms of operative intersectionality and tend to be based on forms of methodological racism that function by erasing the work of women of color under the guise of argumentative neutrality and philosophical rigor. While I make no attempt to centralize the intersectional perspective across philosophical projects, I argue that making room for it in the discipline means coming to terms with the uncritical assumptions and racialized biases responsible for its marginalization.

Tracing Intersectionality

Intersectionality is not a new concept. It can be seen in black feminist writings since the nineteenth century and includes the works of Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Elise McDougald, Sadie Alexander, and Francis Beale, to name only a few. Their work is based on critical examinations of lived experience in light of the systematic racism, sexism, and classism that permeated all aspects of their lives. As such, their writings disclose the existence of compound structural oppressions in society, since black women were at the crossroads of gendered bias in patriarchal society, racial bias in racist republics, and class bias in stratified public life. Their analyses helped explain the constant sliding or erasure of their visibility in the political projects of white feminism, the constitutional and anti-racist projects of male abolitionists, and the economic and industrial advancements of the nation state. But they also helped explain the confluence of all these forces in the course of everyday life, how a simple encounter at the doctor or a public utilities office could yield discriminatory and materially harmful experiences, all under the guise of democratic neutrality and egalitarian social discourses. Their work thus constitutes a significant, systematic approach to combating oppressions based on critical examinations of lived experience—not only as women, but as socially situated black women at the intersections of multiple social forces and asymmetrical power relations. The focus was not on identifying primary features of social identity subject to power variances in culture, but on diagnosing the specific, historically situated forces of social life that worked together as causal determinants of black women's oppression. Classism, racism, and sexism along with heterosexism and ableism worked together to perpetuate harms against black women—sometimes visibly in outward public aggressions and sometimes invisibly, in the discursive exclusions of social policies, legal protections and social benefits of citizenship. But they were not the only identifiable features of how oppression functioned; Afro-Latinas, for instance, faced social exclusions along identity categories that included ethnic origin and linguistic difference. The genealogical roots of intersectionality thus homed in on the *operation of power* associated with features of identity, but identity as a fluid determinant of cultural attitudes and values in a given time and place. While it would be a mistake to downplay the primacy of race and gender in black feminist's analysis of oppression, it would be equally problematic to read early intersectional works as reducible to additive accounts of oppressed identities (leading to a reading of black women as "hyper-oppressed"). Early intersectional accounts of black women's identities was a way

of giving voice to the outcome of the operations of power in their lives, which included structural and large-scale analyses of the determinants of oppression.

And yet, with the academic rise of the intersectional model of identity—which centers on a critique of monistic, unitary models of identity applicable to *any* social agent—the roots of intersectionality in black feminism and historically situated asymmetries of power have been expunged from intersectionality’s history. Instead, intersectionality became a way to conceptualize the relation between multiple axes of oppression for any social agent, and was slowly reabsorbed by the discursive priorities and guiding norms of inclusivity in Anglophone feminist practice. The problem this raises is not a direct consequence of these norms, but the conceptual disarmament and dulling of a critical tool’s important edge, one fashioned to be especially adept at combating the specificity of oppressions black women faced. The specificity of these oppressions rides on the “historical reality of Afro-American women’s continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation,” which is a historical difference that makes a theoretical difference (Combahee River Collective 1978: 362).

Philosopher Katherine Gines (2011) has proposed a corrective to the erasure of this intellectual tradition by aptly noting its existence as a distinct, “proto-intersectional” intellectual tradition that preceded its academic articulation in the late twentieth century (275). Thematically, proto-intersectional thought is concerned with the articulation of multiple oppressions in the lives of black women. Francis Beale’s “Double Jeopardy: To Be Female and Black” (1970) is thus a conceptually linked account of the double bind Sojourner Truth was also describing in her critiques of abolitionists who excluded women and feminists who effaced black women in their struggles. While thinking beyond binary or reductive accounts of women’s lives became critical to giving voice to the phenomenologically complex realities black women faced—especially because so many of the existing social discourses worked to efface the cultural visibility of that complexity—it was by no means a theoretical exercise. Before the intersectionality paradigm was abstracted into many of its current apolitical formulations it was rooted in a critical examination of black women’s lived experience *for the purposes of liberation from oppression*. Analyzing and making sense of the ways one is being harmed in order to produce coping and resistance strategies is thus the organizing fulcrum for many proto-intersectional narratives.

Over time, five key features emerged from black feminist intellectual traditions and their various articulations of the intersectionality paradigm: (1) an emphasis on lived experience as the starting point of critical inquiry; (2) an emphasis on the multidimensionality of experience; (3) a diagnostic acumen for the role of *power*; (4) a focus on the systematic, multivalent, and interlocking nature of oppressions; and (5) an emphasis on the emancipatory aims of critical analyses of structural oppressions. All five features come together in what is arguably the first methodological account of intersectionality, the Combahee River Collective’s founding statement:

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. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.

(1978: 363)

Despite the existence of the proto-intersectional tradition, academically, intersectionality is most often traced back to the 1980s, when black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw used the term heuristically to critique “the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” in doctrinal interpretations of US antidiscrimination law (1989: 140). Race and gender intersect, she argued. They are linked together and overlap in their various manifestations of power, privilege, subordination, and disadvantage. When a black woman experiences discrimination US law disambiguates which features of experience map on to being discriminated against on the basis of being a woman (sexism), and which on the basis of being black (racism). When it’s both, they’re “additive,” but where identity is reduced to single-axis categories of “woman” and/or “black” that must operate independently of each other to fall under the right legal umbrella that protects them (e.g., Title VII vs. Title IX). Black women plaintiffs claiming compound discrimination have had to *sieve their experiences* through a categorical colander that separated out experiences of racism and those of sexism, only to try and put them back together into legal arguments and lexicons that were not equipped to capture the intersectional experience of black women in the first place. This is in itself a type of harm being done to black women plaintiffs: an intersectional oppression that results from the inability of legal frameworks to recognize the ways multiply-positioned subjects are precariously positioned in culturally asymmetrical ways.

According to Crenshaw, although it is possible to be discriminated against along a single axis of identity, her claim is that at minimum, minority women can’t simply switch off their gender when experiencing racism, nor can they un-race their bodies while suffering sexism. And this is a critical facet of experience to understand if one is to seek legal remedy for an injurious experience, as one cannot grieve what is not acknowledged as existing. Discrimination, though it may appear to follow a single-axis trajectory, may in fact be operating along two or more axes, but with recourse to only one track of social visibility (and therefore legal audibility). As a case in point, Crenshaw cites *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, where five black women plaintiffs sued General Motors after the company’s seniority and promotion system ensured no black woman could survive the recession-based layoffs, since the company had only recently begun hiring black women. The court pointed out that General Motors had a documented history of hiring women (albeit white women), therefore their claim of sex discrimination was dismissed. They had also hired black men, partially mitigating the claim to racism. The court, however, acknowledged the existence of broad allegations of racial discrimination in pending litigation against General Motors, suggesting during oral arguments that that the plaintiffs consolidate their claims with the black plaintiffs in that case. When counsel for the plaintiffs in *DeGraffenreid* declined, insisting that they were suing on behalf of *black women*—as they, specifically, were “the last to be hired and the first to be fired,” making such discrimination against black women a perpetuation of past discrimination (thereby violating Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964)—the court ruled that there was no legal precedent for establishing that “Black women are a special class to be protected from discrimination” (Crenshaw 1989: 141). The court worried that by adding the statutory protections given to women *and* those given to blacks, black women might establish special access to a “super-remedy” that protects them more than, for instance, a black man experiencing discrimination.

Crenshaw identifies several problems with this type of legal reasoning, four of which are key to the development of intersectional social theory. First, human experience is not additive but temporally thick with the simultaneous and dynamic intersections of socio-historical identity categories. One experiences a compound harm *as* a black woman, not as the sum of being a woman *and* black. Again, this is not to say that black women don't experience discrimination or mobilize politically along a single axis, only that it's never that simple for any subject who is multiply positioned across a number of historically asymmetrical social categories:

I am suggesting that Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men . . . often they experience double-discrimination—the *combined effects* of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination *as* Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.

(Crenshaw 1989: 149, emphasis added)

Identity, on this account, is intersectional for multiply-positioned subjects like black women. It is approached as a social feature of identity based on historical contingencies, not an essence or immutable property of human identity, as Crenshaw is clear in not aspiring to propose “some new, totalizing theory of identity” (1991: 1244). Neither is it an essentialist construction of identity as “always multiple” or plural; the suggestion is simply that one cannot bracket out different dimensions of human identity in piecemeal fashion or cauterize the subject along intersections that happen to be especially ripe with power differentials *when trying to seek relief for injuries that operate through those very channels*. It will place the plaintiff in an experiential contradiction and a legal no-man's land.

The second problem this type of legal reasoning poses is the reliance on privileged interpretive frameworks that cannot robustly capture black women's experience of compound harms. For instance, in separating out race and gender, black women's experiences remain subordinated to the centrality of white women's and black men's experiences in the conceptualization of gender and race discrimination respectively. Single-axis thinking thereby “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” (Crenshaw 1989: 140). When we think of women, we centralize the experience of white women, and when we think of blacks, we centralize the experience of men. In the eyes of the court, black women were thus too much like the white women hired by General Motors and not different enough from black men suing General Motors to constitute an independent legal claim as black women. A third harm is extended to the public realm, where the intersectional experience is erased for black women who must navigate between the systematic exclusions of white feminism and male anti-racists in political projects. Crenshaw calls this double-bind facet of intersectionality “political intersectionality” to distinguish it from “structural intersectionality,” which highlights the inadequacy of single-axis social remedies like anti-racism to address harms caused by intersectional oppressions, such as sexist racism. Yet a fourth problem, alluded to earlier, is the creation of a meta-legal harm that results when legal systems fail to provide relief as a result of the tacit operations of power in the conceptual frameworks employed in legal reasoning. Despite

claims to procedural objectivity and ideological neutrality, *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* demonstrates the ways the law is unable to capture (and thus remedy) the harms to black women plaintiffs on account of the “established analytical structure” for understanding the compound harms of racism and sexism: a more intersectional approach is thus needed in doctrinal interpretations of US anti-discrimination law.

We can further extend Crenshaw’s analysis through a hermeneutical lens. On this account, one way of understanding the myopic nature of “the established analytical structure” legal reasoning employs is to look at the deeper, pre-predicative cultural interpretive lenses that guide the contours of legal reasoning, to the detriment of experiences unaccounted for by those ways of seeing and interpreting the world. Cultural interpretive lenses are a type of backdrop, a blueprint or social alphabet for turning bare experiences into articulable social phenomena—phenomena that derive their significance dialogically from their very intelligibility and communicability to others (usually understood through a shared language and communal share in the resources of expression). Every judgement thereby requires a prior *tacit* silhouette of meaning one grows into as a social being, a blueprint-shaped prejudice or *prejudice* that the hermeneutic philosophical tradition typically sees as normatively neutral, since values are relative to the contingencies of cultural differences across time and place. On this view, prejudices are the epistemic *preconditions* to valuations,¹ and only valuations carry normative charge. (Paradoxically, this is also what makes it possible to critique racism with anti-racism, or slavery with emancipation, since the narrative contours of anti-racism and liberation take shape dialogically, in relation to and within the same hermeneutic tradition.) However, a more critical hermeneutic lens inclusive of power dynamics reveals just the opposite. That in fact, owing to the culturally asymmetrical operations of power in European colonial and Settler Imperial history, hermeneutical prejudices underlying attitudes towards race, gender, and personal identity can yield complex yet non-visible harms like the ones Crenshaw identifies. This is because these prejudices are not normatively neutral but stem from the conceptual orthodoxies, metaphysical assumptions and epistemic valuations of the historical lifeworld that emerged in Asia Minor in the fifth century BCE and formed the foundations of Western intellectual history—a tradition that historically occludes the lives and realities of people of color as part of that interpretive scaffolding.

In examining the court’s ruling in *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* we find deep conceptual biases towards occidental principles of uniformity, separability, and “the mathematical principles of permutation and combination” for understanding identity as a divisible substance (not to mention a discursive reliance on Greco-Roman myths as harbingers of truth) that form the basis of the court’s intersectionally blind legal reasoning:

The prospect of the creation of new classes of protected minorities, governed only by the mathematical principles of permutation and combination, clearly raises the prospect of opening up the hackneyed Pandora’s box . . . [the plaintiffs have] cause for action for race discrimination, sex discrimination, or *alternatively either, but not a combination of both.*

(413 F. Supp. 144)

The court ruled that black women were not a class of protected minorities and had no standing as “black women” using Aristotelian laws of identity, atomistic frameworks for conceptualizing the divisibility of the body, and additive logics based on binary models of

divisibility. The claim is not that these ways of making sense of the world are incapable of capturing the realities of intersectional lived experience, or that they can't be strategically deployed to do so in light of postcolonial realities. The issue is that they often function on stealth mode through a simultaneous *erasure* of parallel cultural narratives and a devaluation of the interpretive resources of non-dominant historical communities.² If, as Nietzsche noted, the social history of millennia is encoded in language—in ways of seeing, naming, and formulating contexts of significance in culture—it matters that the resources of expression and interpretation behind legal reasoning are acknowledged as being tied to particular cultural traditions, their projects, values and historical assumptions. Leibnizian notions of identity as uniformity, for instance, arose largely through liturgical and scriptural concerns that were themselves part of a longer conversation within the Western metaphysical and Judeo-Christian hermeneutical tradition. When conceptual orthodoxies are turned into interpretive resources in culture, power enters the equation, as these are very often resources that communities of color and women have historically had asymmetrical access to and participation in shaping. The court's summary judgment shows how the established analytical structure for understanding compound harms in legal claims is thus based on more primordial epistemic and metaphysical assumptions that historically disclose the visibility of white, normative identities. The law is biased, all the way down. And it is against this bias that the critical juridical and doctrinal work of interpreting antidiscrimination law—of “bending” it, as Crenshaw calls it—begins. Intersectionality can play a powerful role in this by showing the blind spots in single-axis thinking behind legal reasoning, but it is ultimately a practical confrontation with oppressive social relations rather than a theoretical confrontation of identity models in philosophy. For Crenshaw, failure to see the multifaceted web-like nature of gendered and racist oppression can result in social, institutional, and juridical systems that are structurally unresponsive to the needs, situations, and concerns of historically oppressed communities, and in fact may be the source of harm. Likewise, an institution or system (and discursive access thereto) may be incorrectly seen as inclusive of marginalized identities and communities at the same time that it works to oppress those communities, even with life-and-death consequences (see Crenshaw 2012).

Intersectionality, even as an academic concept, begins in a specific context of oppression where a court could speak about women of color, render legal verdicts about them, without the ability to legally acknowledge the embodied existence of the very women of color seeking justice in the courtroom. It is an analytic tool to help diagnose a problem (like the ability of a court to declare black women are not a special class to be protected from discrimination) and chart possible ways forward: if we lose sight of the problem, we erase part of the design. Feminist legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon thus aptly notes that “intersectionality begins in the concrete experience of race and sex together in the lives of real people, with Black women as the starting point” (2013: 1020).

Historical Reception and Criticisms

With its accelerated uptake in gender studies and the social sciences in the 1990s, the academic framing of intersectionality changed rapidly to prioritize the discursive projects of Anglo-American feminisms and the need for more generalizable, universalizable social theories compatible across a wider spectrum of specialized disciplinary jargons. As it disseminated across disciplines and popular culture, intersectionality broadened

exponentially to address questions regarding the essential features of human identity, the social construction of subjective experience, and the role of single-axis thinking in disciplinary methods. In women's, gender and disabilities studies it became particularly relied on to discuss widening social identity axes and matrixes of sexuality, non-gender conforming identities and ableist attitudes in culture. But it also suffered from centripetal dispersion across a vast disciplinary range, making the term a minimal stand-in for one's awareness that identity is not monotopic, or as a lexical trigger to escape charges of sexism or racism. It became possible to engage in debates using the term "intersectional" without reference to racialized women or the dynamics of power that affect specific historical communities.

Without critical attunement to the long history of black feminist's proto-intersectional intellectual projects, intersectionality fell prey to processes of academic mainstreaming, abstraction and ideological reticulation. Through ritualized iterations in academic programming, university curricula, and insular conference programming (which often obfuscated the intellectual presence of black women and minorities), intersectionality lost its gravitational pull in material contexts of oppression and became associated with more general, systems-level accounts of oppression as interlocking, ideas about complex personhood, and a battleground for academic debates over identity politics. At its broadest level, intersectionality came to be seen as a critical social theory whose main insight was a feminist account of identity. At the center of this account is the intersectional model of identity.

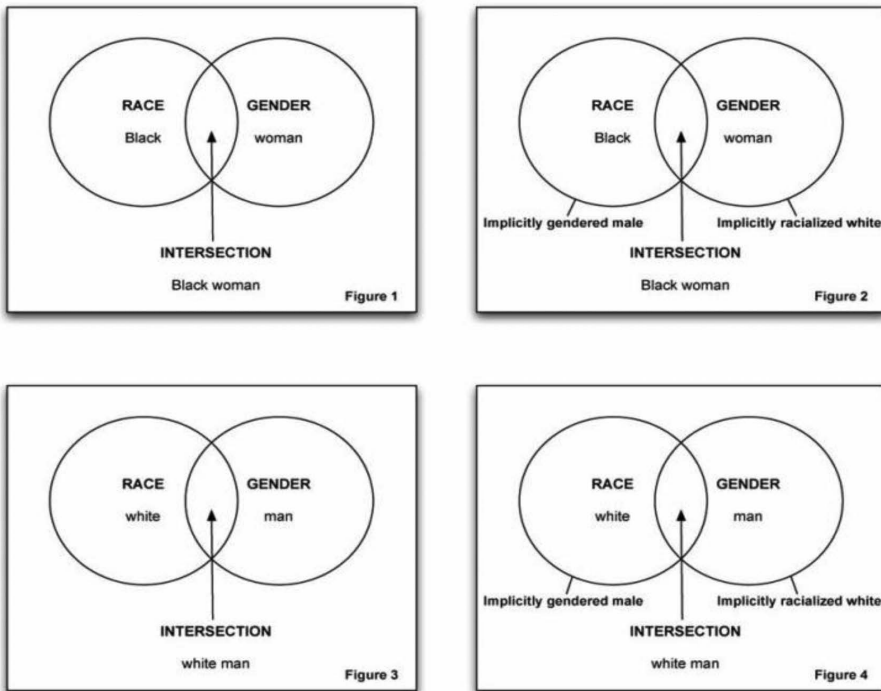


Figure 24.1 The intersectional model of identity³.

The intersectional model of identity seeks to describe the social location of *any* individual in relation to the systems of oppression that shape the social construction of their identity. Race, class, and gender are constitutive of these systems insofar as they are often used implicitly to differentiate between social agents and mete out social goods unevenly, leading to structural inequities organized around social identities. By focusing on complex identity, the intersectional model of identity is said to help pluralize analyses of oppression that rely on simple hierarchical binaries, such as the patriarchal oppression of women by men, the domination of States over non-state actors, and the racialized oppression of blacks by whites. Oppressions are multiple, latticed, and interlocking in ways that symbiotically co-constitute structures of domination. Under this framework, intersectionality can be applied to any subject oppressed along “multiple” axes. Today, this identic model of intersectionality *operates* under the banner of intersectional feminisms, having unframed the concept from proto-intersectional framings of lived concerns. *Operative intersectionality*, as I call it, thus slowly supplanted black feminist’s account of intersectionality. This was partly achieved by producing methodological questions and internal critiques that triangulated with classical concerns in Anglo-American feminisms (traditionally dominated by white, middle-class women), such as the need to produce politically inclusive models of solidarity to unify and focus struggles against patriarchal domination. Historically, these critiques are clustered along five main lines of argument. They charge that intersectionality:

1. Essentializes the experiences and identities of black women
2. Sidetracks the emancipatory projects of political feminism by dismantling the categorical force of “women” as a group and focusing on “difference”
3. Fails to address the processes that underlie, create and maintain the categories of race, sex, and gender
4. Privileges race and gender in the social construction of identity and is monotopic along only a handful of social identity axes
5. Perpetuates rather than overcomes the unitary model of identity by relying on analytically pure identity categories (as the precondition for their intersection).

When intersectionality is abstracted as an identitarian theory of “difference” rather than a situated advocacy strategy against oppression, critiques of essentialism, experiential overdetermination, and identic underdetermination arise. But these are criticisms of operational intersectionality, not feminist intersectionality. For Crenshaw, black women are not a monolithic category or *the* paradigm intersectional subjects of a theory of identity; the need to talk about black women and women of color comes from the situated realities of the ways some societies asymmetrically harm historical communities, especially through mechanisms that are seldom fully transparent to all social agents. Doctrinal definitions of discrimination were inadequate, not because they could not account for black women’s identities, but because the lived materiality of black women’s *experiences* of compound discrimination—that they were experiencing multiple oppressions—were being covered over by a framework that happened to prioritize specific understandings of identity (based on the intersectional exclusion of race and gender). But this is due to the historical provenance of sexist racism in occidental legal systems and the covering-over of that history as part of the neocolonial operation of power. Against the charge that intersectionality does not address the forces behind the

categories of sex and gender, Crenshaw points out that intersectionality “addressed the larger ideological structures” behind how problems and solutions are framed for historically marginalized communities, since identity is a feature of the operations of power and not the other way around.

One way to understand this is to differentiate between analytical and hermeneutic accounts of identity production in intersectional thinking. The former holds that a subject is the product of schematized identic terms (or the confluence of analytical categories) symbolized in the intersectional model of identity. While these categories are not fixed, irreducibly stable, or uninflected by one another, the analytic model accounts for diachronic elements in identity production by subsuming them as features of synchronic categories. Hermeneutic accounts, on the other hand, extend explanatory priority to the diachronicity of subject formation. They conceptualize human selfhood dialogically through the broader background of interpretive frameworks in which identities come to have meaning or get taken up, as in the products of the historical operations of power. On this account “intersectionality fills out the Venn diagrams at points of overlap where convergence has been *neglected*, training its sights where vectors of inequality intersect at crossroads that have previously been at best sped through” by virtue of historical prejudices (MacKinnon 2013: 1020). So the first model sees what appears, the latter what does not. Or better yet, what cannot appear, what resists its telling on account of the social forces and biases that work to occlude such visibility. Diachronicity is therefore key to intersectional feminisms because only against a backdrop of historical oppressions does the “neglect” become a salient feature of analysis. It is also important methodologically, as the synchronic schematization of the intersectional model of identity is based on Western metaphysical conceptual orthodoxies that re-inscribe substance ontology, which privileges the identification of what appears over what does not. (This is especially pernicious for diagnosing the tacit harms of multiple oppressions.) It also helps illuminate how intersectionality, as a hermeneutic lens that is diagnostic of power relations, is not an exhaustive compendium of social harms, a totalizing account of how oppression courses through one’s life, nor how identity comes to be shaped by it on all accounts. Intersectional feminists like Patricia Hill Collins have aptly noted that all subjects are intersectional in stratified societies, yet if this is understood outside the diachronic and diagnostic feature of proto-intersectional thought, it leads to misdirected critiques of intersectionality’s failures to pluralize the unified character of white men’s identities.⁴

By way of academic mainstreaming, Anglo-American feminists have reframed the genealogy of intersectionality through a citational politics and disambiguation of terms internal to their own intellectual traditions. This does not mean they are uncritical, uncommitted to intersectional social justice—indeed most position themselves as advocates of it—or that intellectual traditions are monolithic or mutually exclusive. It does not suggest that all Anglo-American feminists are white women or assign political projects along racialized and gendered identity axes. But it does suggest that, at minimum, intellectual mainstreaming is not apolitical. It is not a value-free natural process organized around a forward-scoping developmental continuum that randomly selects or adapts concepts to fit the academic attitudes of a given time. Mainstreaming can and often does function within a micropolitics of power, chains of mystification and discursive regimes that disclose the lifeworld of some interpretive communities over others. The unstated goal of mainstreaming processes is thus to delink a concept from situated

aspects of its origins to weaken its force outside a given domain of discourse—to change what is unrecognizably foreign in a concept to the more familiar stabilized forms one is accustomed to handling, interpreting, and critiquing. This is how an advocacy strategy forged in life-and-death circumstances became a loose academic term to denote that a person is not reducible to a single identity category. It has also made it more difficult to advance internal critiques and conceptual modifications within women of color intersectional feminisms that are attuned to the tectonic geopolitical shifts that affect our current struggles for liberation.

New Directions in Intersectional Feminisms

According to MacKinnon, “Intersectionality is meant to be applied to real-world problems, to unsettle oppressive logics, to plumb gaps or silences for suppressed meanings and implications, and to rethink how we approach liberation politics” (2015: vii–viii). Given its strengths for conceptualizing simultaneity, systematicity, asymmetry, and context-dependent strategies against oppression, decolonized of its reduction to identitarian theories Intersectionality is an important analytic tool for disassembling the systematicity of oppression faced by women and girls in the global South. This is not only in keeping with the conceptual (re)armament of proto-intersectional thought as a diagnostic of oppression, but also reflects intersectionality’s history of deep engagements with third world and decolonial feminisms. Because cultural processes of decolonization in the global South often involved the need to account for the synchronicity of the various social systems through which oppression flowed—to demystify the inner workings of interlocking networks that together, worked to produce colonial domination—strong conceptual resonance between black and third world feminisms arose in the mid- to late twentieth century, often with cross pollination and theoretical inflection (Spivak, Mohanty, Lugones, Anzaldúa, Schutte).

In recent years a handful of scholars mindful of what it means to theorize identity out of specific geopolitical contexts have launched important challenges to the identic-based, operational model of intersectionality, focusing instead on the multidimensionality of experience and the multistable character of oppression in the fight for social justice. Among them, Kristie Dotson argues that intersectionality “is a valuable mechanism for the construction of social facts concerning oppression, where oppression is understood as a multi-stable phenomenon” that allows (or opens up the possibility) for greater perceptibility of the jeopardizations covered over by monolithic cultural readings of oppression (2014). Her work moves us towards a liberational epistemology grounded in decolonial and intersectional theory, as intersectionality unsettles oppressive logics with attunement to the diachronic materiality of being.

Through its conceptual decolonization, intersectional social theory can be said to denote the complex ways in which the simultaneity of oppression functions through the localized, situated character of a speaker’s social location in culture, where that location is like a nodal point on a web crisscrossed by multiple vectors of social forces that are multidimensional (but may appear one-dimensional from a given vantage point). From the perspective of legal narratives or institutional discourses, for instance, the speaker may appear as a single, monadic point along a two-dimensional line; a tightrope walker balancing the weight of seemingly discreet, enumerable forces on each end. From the tightrope walker’s perspective, the multidimensionality of the experience expands to

include wind direction, speed, psychic life, bodily motility, and exhaustion, and which she may feel to be essential to robustly describe her experience or enumerate her needs. Because social institutions often extend causal and explanatory priority to categories that exclude some identities as a tool of domination, the concept works to expand the capacity to bear witness to experiences of marginality and harm, especially for the purposes of vivifying and remedying oppressions. But it also works to diagnose system-level operations of power that function on stealth mode, thus helping sustain the systematic character of structural oppression alongside the appearance of democratic institutions and egalitarian ideals. It points to the ways oppressions do not act independently of one another in neat, cauterized ways, yet places the theoretical accent on the phenomenological gravity sustained by the lived experience of oppression. Lastly, while intersectional analyses call for a diachronic understanding of asymmetrical power relations in culture, it is not a closed system of analysis but an open-ended hermeneutic lens that helps disclose barriers in the fight for social justice.

In light of Dotson's work, we can also see that given the powerful analytic lens Intersectionality offers for thinking about oppression, power differentials, and social inequalities, its relative invisibility in contemporary philosophy—which cannot survive without disciplinary attunement to the material and epistemic struggles of oppressed peoples and communities of the global South—is unwarranted. While some critical race and feminist philosophers have long embraced intersectional analyses in their work, many continue to lag behind in defense of more mainstream, depoliticized, and universalizable frameworks for thinking through the relation between social identity and human experience. One problem this raises is the continuous re-centering of normative theories and perspectives that are not maximally equipped to address concerns that emanate from intersectional lived experience and the lives of people of color. Conceptually, intersectionality can do what philosophers must often look to multiple frameworks in combination to do, but whose admixture still elides the specific attunement to intersectional oppressions. It is this feature of academic practice that warrants criticism in light of the systematic presence of sexist racism in philosophy.

Conclusion

In this chapter I argued that the framing of intersectionality fell prey to processes of academic mainstreaming that weakened its diagnostic power and displaced its most important liberational features. In section one, "Tracing Intersectionality," I outlined the history of the concept by situating it in the long tradition of black feminist thought and critical legal studies, as illustrated in twentieth-century US antidiscrimination law. I discussed Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal account of intersectionality and the proto-intersectional tradition that preceded it in nineteenth-century black feminist thought. In section two, "Historical Reception and Criticisms," I discussed the historical receptions and disciplinary critiques of intersectionality by drawing a distinction between scholars who emphasize questions surrounding the nature of human identity and those mindful of what it means to theorize identity out of specific geopolitical contexts. I argued the former result in a unique academized strain of intersectionality I termed "operative intersectionality" and identified its source to an uncritical triangulation with philosophical projects disconnected from the original impetus and critical design of intersectionality. In section three, "New Directions in Intersectional Feminisms,"

I highlighted the analytic power of conceptualizing the simultaneity of oppressions as key to a new wave of feminist liberation epistemologies. I concluded by calling for a reframing of the (co-opted) concept through processes of academic decolonization and pointed to recent thinkers, such as Dotson, as examples of liberational, decolonial uses of intersectional feminisms.

Notes

- 1 Understood as irreducible to mind-dependent states. It is better understood through a social epistemological lens that is productive of a kind of basic attitude towards things, a bodily comportment or way of pre-reflectively taking in the things we encounter in everyday life, from daily use of objects to our understanding of who we are in relation to our jobs, relationships, and values.
- 2 For example, the occidental privileging of knowledge through written documents (i.e., as logographic recording methods based on Romanized alphabetic literacy) undergirds the devaluation and limitations placed on third-person oral testimonies as hearsay, suggesting cultural power is more deeply embedded in legal reasoning than legal reasoning itself can disclose. This erasure is especially difficult to spot because the explanting of one interpretive framework is covered over by the implanting of another—in this case by the assumptive logic behind principles of scientific objectivity and sound LEGAL reasoning based on “precedent”—thus giving the appearance of procedural neutrality. This is followed by an internal cultural narrative of historical mystification that erases traces of this process in favor of developmental accounts of legal reason; racist and sexist myopias in the law can be explained away by a story about the law’s nascence and necessary social evolution (while retaining its appearance of neutrality) rather than the cultural prejudices built into its design, its forms of analysis, and ways of adjudicating the alleged harms before it. The history of the legality of slavery and rape can thereby be neatly disassociated of from modern-day doctrinal interpretations of black women plaintiff’s claims, or their systematic expurgation from court dockets.
- 3 Carastathis, 2008, 31.
- 4 See, for instance, Carastathis’s claim that “intersectionality contributes nothing novel to our conception of the ‘white man’—except, ironically, further confirmation of the ‘unified’ character of that identity” (2008, 28).

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