

Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis

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## **Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis**

**A**s intersectionality has emerged in a number of discursive spaces, the projects and debates that have accompanied its travel have converged into a burgeoning field of intersectional studies. This field can be usefully framed as representing three loosely defined sets of engagements: the first consisting of applications of an intersectional framework or investigations of intersectional dynamics, the second consisting of discursive debates about the scope and content of intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological paradigm, and the third consisting of political interventions employing an intersectional lens.

The first approach applies an intersectional frame of analysis to a wide range of research and teaching projects. Aggregated together in this category are undertakings that build on or adapt intersectionality to attend to a variety of context-specific inquiries, including, for example, analyzing the multiple ways that race and gender interact with class in the labor market; interrogating the ways that states constitute regulatory regimes of identity, reproduction, and family formation; developing doctrinal alternatives to bend antidiscrimination law to accommodate claims of compound discrimination; and revealing the processes by which grassroots organizations shape advocacy strategies into concrete agendas that transcend traditional single-axis horizons.

A second field of inquiry focuses on discursive investigations of intersectionality as theory and methodology. This approach includes (but is not limited to) questions and debates about the way intersectionality has been developed, adopted, and adapted within the disciplines. It considers what intersectionality includes, excludes, or enables and whether intersectionality's contextual articulations call either for further development or for disavowal and replacement. Within this framework are debates about whether there is an essential subject of intersectionality and, if so, whether the subject is statically situated in terms of identity, geography, or temporality or is dynamically

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constituted within institutions and structures that are neither temporally nor spatially circumscribed.

A third category of intersectional projects reflects the reality that while intersectionality has been the subject of disciplinary travel, it is far from being only an academic project. Both in its earliest articulations and in its subsequent travels, praxis has been a key site of intersectional critique and intervention. We define praxis as encompassing a wide range of phenomena, from society- and work-centered movements to demand greater economic justice for low-income women of color (e.g., Carastathis 2013; Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin 2013); to legal and policy advocacy that seeks to remedy gender and racial discrimination (e.g., Carbado 2013; Verloo 2013); to state-targeted movements to abolish prisons, immigration restrictions, and military interventions that are nominally neutral with respect to race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and nation but are in fact disproportionately harmful to communities of color and to women and gays in those communities (e.g., Spade 2013). As part of these efforts, scholars and activists illustrate how practice necessarily informs theory, and how theory ideally should inform best practices and community organizing. These concerns reflect the normative and political dimensions of intersectionality and thus embody a motivation to go beyond mere comprehension of intersectional dynamics to transform them.

All of these three dimensions represent well-established patterns of knowledge production, and the schematic suggested here reflects the fluid divisions among them. As such, it is more a heuristic device than a categorical one. Nonetheless, we might broadly differentiate projects along these provisional lines of demarcation by highlighting the ways that some practitioners mobilize intersectionality as a tool to interrogate and intervene in the social plane while others seek to interrogate intersectionality as a theoretical framework through the formal requirements of social theory and methodology. In naming and working across these subfields, we do not mean to imply that the practical applications lack theory, nor do we mean to suggest that the discursive dimensions of intersectionality are either prior to or fully independent of the practical. Yet in thinking somewhat expansively about the potential ways that these different inquiries might constitute the field, we are interested in exploring these various sites of intersectional production both on their own terms and in relation to one another. We come to this assessment, of course, as participants who are not without our own views about the merits of a variety of projects and claims made under the broad umbrella of intersectionality. That we disagree with some of the arguments and inferences while finding others quite compelling does not detract from our sense that interrogating the many engagements that inter-

sectionality has fostered can inform our thinking about future directions for research, scholarship, and action.

Our discussion here moves from the central question—what *is* intersectionality?—to a proposed template for fusing the three levels of engagement with intersectionality into a field of intersectional studies. Our sketch of the theoretical and applied segments of the field is also sensitive to the disciplinary contours of studies of intersectionality and the shaping of the field by political questions. In our section “Articles in This Issue: Key Themes and Central Questions,” we focus in greater detail on the political dimensions of intersectionality, with an emphasis on questions of how intersectionality is implemented—literally put into practice in policies and social movements around the world.

### **Engaging intersectionality**

We begin by recognizing the remarkable degree of theoretical and methodological engagement that the concept of intersectionality has invited among feminist and antiracist scholars around the globe. Intersectionality was introduced in the late 1980s as a heuristic term to focus attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics. It exposed how single-axis thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge production, and struggles for social justice. Over the intervening decades, intersectionality has proved to be a productive concept that has been deployed in disciplines such as history, sociology, literature, philosophy, and anthropology as well as in feminist studies, ethnic studies, queer studies, and legal studies. Intersectionality’s insistence on examining the dynamics of difference and sameness has played a major role in facilitating consideration of gender, race, and other axes of power in a wide range of political discussions and academic disciplines, including new developments in fields such as geography and organizational studies.

As intersectionality has traveled, questions have been raised regarding a number of issues: the utility and limitations of its various metaphors, including the road intersection, the matrix, and the interlocked vision of oppression; the additive and autonomous versus interactive and mutually constituting nature of the race/gender/class/sexuality/nation nexus; the eponymous “et cetera” problem—that is, the number of categories and kinds of subjects (e.g., privileged or subordinate?) stipulated or implied by an intersectional approach; and the static and fixed versus the dynamic and contextual orientation of intersectional research. Intersectional work has also reflected different orientations toward the relative importance and centrality of various



layers of society, ranging from the individual to the institutional, and has also revealed different sensibilities regarding the ontological and epistemological premises of the intersectional approach and its disciplinary limits and potential.<sup>1</sup> Some of the tensions set forth above revolve around intersectionality's capacity to do any work other than to call attention to the particularities of Black women. The historical centrality of American Black women and Black feminism as subjects of intersectionality theory grounds reservations about intersectionality's usefulness as an analytic tool in addressing other marginalized communities and other manifestations of social power.<sup>2</sup> These and related questions about intersectionality's subject have underwritten several interventions.

We name these debates not because we find these tensions unresolvable or each of the questions compelling. Indeed, our sense is that some of what circulates as critical debate about what intersectionality is or does reflects a lack of engagement with both originating and contemporary literatures on intersectionality. Moreover, the widening scope of intersectional scholarship and praxis has not only clarified intersectionality's capacities; it has also amplified its generative focus as an analytical tool to capture and engage contextual dynamics of power. In consequence, we think answers to questions about what intersectional analysis is have been amply demonstrated by what people are deploying it to do. The collection of articles in this issue of *Signs* illustrates the considerable creativity that practitioners have exercised in how they interpret the scope of intersectionality, representing the wide variety of projects that make up the field. Intersectionality has, since the beginning, been posed more as a nodal point than as a closed system—a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities (Lykke 2011). This seems to us to be a more apt description of intersectionality's starting point than one that frames intersectionality as only categorically, spatially, or temporally rooted in specific relations or superficially preoccupied with “difference.”

To be sure, theoretical and methodological questions will continue to mark the unfolding of intersectionality, particularly as opportunities to engage in cross-disciplinary, cross-sectoral, and international exchanges grow. Yet we do not consider the survival of or further development of in-

<sup>1</sup> There are far too many authors who have done important work on these subjects to cite here, so we mention just a few: King (1988), Collins (2000), McCall (2005), Yuval-Davis (2006), Hancock (2007), Walby (2007), Nash (2008), Cole (2009), Choo and Ferree (2010), and Lykke (2011).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Carastathis (2008) and Puar (2011); cf. Coogan-Gehr (2011) and Alexander-Floyd (2012).

tersectionality to turn on any final reconciliation of the many theoretical and methodological debates that its travel has engendered. One could look to analogous approaches to the definition of class (or gender or race) and realize that such debates are lively to this day and likely to never end. There are, for example, several different schools of class analysis coexisting in reasonable harmony (e.g., Lareau and Conley 2008), and the same is true with respect to race as well as gender. Likewise, assessing intersectionality's value against the expectations of a grand theory seems off the mark since we do not understand intersectionality's use or objectives to be realized only through a full-fledged grand theory or a standardized methodology (Crenshaw 2011).

Recognizing intersectionality's historical contingencies, we also want to take the opportunity to address the tendency to receive and assess intersectionality entirely apart from the temporal and contextual dynamics of interpretation that are themselves intersectionally constituted. Intersectionality has traveled into spaces and discourses that are themselves constituted by power relations that are far from transparent. The debates that ensue around the essential subject of intersectionality epitomize this process. Many of our contributors draw attention not only to the institutional politics of knowledge production that shape the context in which insurgent projects are formed but also to the way such projects are received, historicized, and engaged. Both the ideas at issue and the responses that insurgent ideas engender reflect structural relations that are dynamically constituted by the very forces being interrogated. As the early histories of intersectionality reveal, its production was not located somewhere outside the field of race and gender power but was an active and direct engagement with issues and dynamics that embodied such power. In fact, intersectional texts in the early years of critical legal studies were virtual transcripts of active contestations set within institutional formations that both shaped what was talked about and established templates—discursive conventions and recognizable methods—for making visible the dynamics that were at play (Crenshaw 2011). These conditions of possibility, as well as the debates they initially engendered, are relevant not only to intersectionality's discursive history but to thinking through how intersectionality currently travels and develops as a field.

Contextualizing the articulation of intersectionality in the legal academy draws out the conditions of its possibility, and its discursive relations to legal subjectivity—a matter of some import in its interdisciplinary and international travels. The material circumstances that occasioned the emergence of intersectionality were shaped by social transformations that were playing out within the profession and within law itself. The legal academy, for instance, began to diversify itself in terms of race and gender from the

1980s to the mid-1990s. Made possible in part by the national movements for faculty diversity in law schools, a window of hires created a small but critical mass of scholars of color, many of whom came to the law with activist backgrounds and progressive politics around race, class, and gender. Influenced by intellectual traditions arising from Black feminism, ethnic studies, and community activism, these scholars took these sensibilities into sites, such as critical legal studies, where law and its relationship to social power were being theorized, interrogated, and contested (Peller 2011).

The intellectual and institutional methodologies that shaped the interventions made by critical legal studies were grounded in the practice of subjecting existing doctrines to trenchant critique, a practice predicated on the belief that uncovering the rationalizations that reinforce social power is a necessary, though not sufficient, step toward transformation. Legal scholars found ample material for such critiques as the legitimating logics of American antidiscrimination law became increasingly apparent in the doctrinal obstacles and outright reversals of modest legal reforms. As the various disjunctures between gender and race discourses played out in these contexts, feminists of color saw connections between the rigid structuring of law that rationalized narrow and mutually exclusive approaches to intersecting patterns of subordination, on the one hand, and the single-axis frameworks within progressive, antiracist, and feminist discourses that were being contested by feminists of color elsewhere, on the other.

Reflecting the critical methodologies of doctrinal critique that circulated within critical legal studies, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (Crenshaw 1989) was an explicitly interventionist response to the institutional and political discourses that largely ignored these issues. “Demarginalizing the Intersection” analyzed a collection of legal cases in which Black female claimants were unsuccessful both in their attempts to articulate a compound claim of discrimination (specifically, their having been excluded from the workforce both as women who are Black and as Blacks who are women) and in their efforts to represent all women or all Blacks in subsequent cases. The problem these cases seemed to represent was not simply the judges’ failure to recognize particularity *per se* but their greater failure to uncover the paradoxical dimension of the sameness/difference rationales that undergirded antidiscrimination law more broadly. By these logics, Black females are both too similar to Black men and white women to represent themselves and too different to represent either Blacks or women as a whole (see Carabado 2013). Although Black male and white female narratives of discrimination were understood to be fully inclusive and universal, Black female



narratives were rendered partial, unrecognizable, something apart from standard claims of race discrimination or gender discrimination. “Demarginalizing the Intersection” sought to reverse those assumptions by uncovering law’s myopic conceptualization of discrimination.

This reflection provides at least one example of how the discursive terrain out of which the intersectional frame was constructed informs intersectionality’s complex engagement with the liberal subject. From the start, intersectionality’s articulations within law challenged the putatively universal subject of antidiscrimination law and, later, the antiviolence movement (Crenshaw 1991). To be clear, however, the ends of problematizing the legal subject in class-action lawsuits and in anti-domestic-violence interventions were not limited to securing legal reforms that would grant greater inclusion to differently defined subjects, such as Black women plaintiffs or battered immigrant women. Rather, understanding the trajectory of intersectionality as part of a larger critique of rights and legal institutions reveals how the intersectional lens looked beyond the more narrowly circumscribed demands for inclusion within the logics of sameness and difference. Instead, it addressed the larger ideological structures in which subjects, problems, and solutions were framed. Thus, while the reformist dimensions of intersectionality embodied interventions that addressed the marginalization of, for example, Black women plaintiffs, these projects were coextensive with a more radical critique of law premised in part on understanding how it reified and flattened power relationships into unidimensional notions of discrimination.

Antidiscrimination doctrine and political discourses predicated on feminism and antiracism certainly do not exhaust the terrain of intersectional erasure, marginalization, and contestation. While numerous projects take up intersectional dynamics within a variety of contexts, it is important to recall as well that both inside and outside of legal circles, debates over the definition of intersectionality in general, and its presumed subject position in particular, reflect an unfolding of scholarly reception and production that is itself situated within fields of social power. Exactly how intersectionality and its presumed subjectivities travel across disciplines and national contexts turns not only on the various theoretical and methodological prisms at play but also on the race, gender, and other discursive prisms through which the theory and its originating contexts are read. To state this more concisely, intersectionality neither travels outside nor is unmediated by the very field of race and gender power that it interrogates. Thus, interpretations of intersectionality within other discursive fields may not escape the dynamics that rendered Black female plaintiffs illegible to courts in the cases initially analyzed. It is far from mere coincidence that current debates about inter-



sectionality's capacity to represent anyone other than Black women bear striking resemblance to courts' discomfort with centering Black women in class-action lawsuits. Our intention herein is not to minimize the debates that intersectionality's travel has engendered but instead to situate intersectionality in the face of the diverse and sometimes oppositional readings that have come to be associated with it.

### **A template for a collaborative intersectionality**

This brief and necessarily partial genealogy suggests that insights and nuances can be gained by attending to the institutional and field-specific ways that intersectionality is articulated. To build on this foundation and look ahead, we would like to consider two alternative scenarios through which intersectionality is, or can potentially be, articulated across and within disciplines and across and within political spaces. Our main objective is to illustrate the potential for achieving greater theoretical, methodological, substantive, and political literacy without demanding greater unity across the growing diversity of fields that constitute the study of intersectionality. Implicit in this aspiration is an understanding of intersectional arenas not as a rigidly delimited set of subfields, separate from other like-minded approaches, but as part and parcel of them.

The first scenario describes something akin to a centrifugal process. In this sense, intersectionality travels from its groundings in Black feminism to critical legal and race studies; to other disciplines and interdisciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences; and across countries and continents as well. It adapts to the different discursive and research protocols in these environments, perhaps modifying how race, gender, and other social dynamics are conceptualized and intertwined or, alternatively, how the central subjects and social categories of intersectionality are identified (see Lewis 2013). Studies of intersectionality also begin to conform to methodological standards and practices of each field and strive to make central contributions to those fields. Projects in this vein seek to formalize the methodological or theoretical foundations of intersectionality within disciplines and to extend their reach within these disciplines by building from the ground of empirical research up—that is, by beginning with empirical studies that subsequently inform theoretical and methodological interventions. Angé-Marie Hancock (2007) in political science, Elizabeth Cole (2009) and Valerie Purdie-Vaughns and Richard Eibach (2008) in psychology, Hae Yeon Choo and Myra Marx Ferree (2010) in sociology, and Sylvia Walby (2007) in philosophy are just a few examples of this pathway into and around intersectionality.

In contrast to the centrifugal process, the second scenario is a more recognizably insurgent one and describes something more akin to a centripetal process. Here, scholars interested in intersectionality strike out mainly in the margins of their disciplines and are often skeptical about the possibility of integrating mainstream methods and theories into their intersectional research. As they are less beholden to disciplinary conventions, their projects may draw on a variety of methods and materials, integrating them into innovative insights that might otherwise have been obscured.

These different processes, broadly conceived, may shed light on some of the challenges that practitioners have encountered in synthesizing intersectional projects across disciplines and contexts. Certainly, it is predictable that research conventions that are understood and taken for granted within one discipline may not be well understood by others in the field of intersectionality. The institutional gravity that pulls the attention of practitioners in their respective disciplines may lead others outside the field to misrecognize or misinterpret intersectional methodologies, or to infer an absence of method altogether. At the same time, efforts to “discipline” intersectionality within established research practice can sometimes proceed along lines that suggest that its insurgent dimensions constitute an unruliness that undermines its utility and future development.

We obviously do not take the position that centrifugal projects are inherently misdirected, a position that would be especially unlikely given our own investments in developing intersectional projects and literacy within our respective fields. Yet we are mindful that disciplinary conventions import a range of assumptions and truth claims that sometimes contribute to the very erasures to which intersectionality draws attention. As practitioners within certain discursive communities, we note that the multiple ways that analytic practices rationalize certain relations are not always apparent (Crenshaw 1989). At the same time, efforts to produce new knowledge cannot dispense with the apparatuses through which information is produced, categorized, and interpreted.

While the methodological insurgency that characterizes centripetal development may open up new pathways of thought, it also comes with potential risks. Pressure to locate a project firmly within a conventional field when part of the project is directed precisely at that field’s conceptual limitations replicates on an academic level the same constraints that confronted plaintiffs who challenged the categorical apparatus in antidiscrimination law. Often, scholars who situate their work against the grain of the standard protocols of knowledge production are themselves subject to the very institutional dynamics they are interrogating. Their discovery of new, cutting-edge methods to identify and articulate intersectional subordination can

indeed cut both ways. Critical analysis of institutional and discursive power is rarely a sufficient prophylactic against its reach.

Innovative thinking at the margins of disciplines may also leave such scholars isolated, heightening the need for a broader interdisciplinary community. Such communal networks would serve important functions in that they would create spaces—discursively and otherwise—for critical masses to gather and share the resources that are vital in sustaining a burgeoning field. Networks provide both young scholars and seasoned ones with opportunities to develop content that is substantively identifiable as part of the field and to become familiar with the critical tools and archives that are essential in sustaining a discursive community. The development of insurgent fields of knowledge such as intersectionality is hampered by the many material and disciplinary obstacles to forging such networks. For example, there are no annual conferences and meetings on intersectionality to foster intellectual interchange, mentorship, and collaboration.

If we recognize that conscious efforts to develop methodological literacy across disciplines and contexts can be productive, it would seem that the future development of intersectionality as a field would be advanced by maximizing the interface between the centrifugal and the centripetal processes. Perhaps these sensibilities can point toward ways of synthesizing some of the tensions that are so frequently reflected in the field. For example, this collection and the conference from which many of the contributions were generated are examples of a centripetal solution to such a state of affairs. The Fourth Annual UCLA School of Law Critical Race Studies Symposium drew together contributors who might generally be positioned within the centrifugal tradition as well as those who were more likely to see their work as straddling divides between strict disciplinary performance and the desire to build a field across disciplines.<sup>3</sup> At that event, and in the many conversations and projects prompted by those exchanges, scholars gained a stronger appreciation of how their work informs and is informed by other work in the field. Other conferences that have provided sites for scholars and activists to engage each other—often productively, even if critically—have taken place in recent years, extending the discursive life of these engagements through research collaborations and publications (Lutz, Herrera Vivar, and Supik 2011; Lewis 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Many of the articles in this issue of *Signs* emerged from deliberations and presentations at this conference, which was titled “Intersectionality: Challenging Theory, Reframing Politics, and Transforming Movements” (Los Angeles, March 11–13, 2010). The conference brought together over three hundred students, scholars, and activists to engage the theme of intersectionality within and across disciplines, subject positions, research objects, and activist coalitions.



Implicit in this broadened field of vision is our view that intersectionality is best framed as an analytic sensibility. If intersectionality is an analytic disposition, a way of thinking about and conducting analyses, then what makes an analysis intersectional is not its use of the term “intersectionality,” nor its being situated in a familiar genealogy, nor its drawing on lists of standard citations. Rather, what makes an analysis intersectional—whatever terms it deploys, whatever its iteration, whatever its field or discipline—is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power. This framing—conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power—emphasizes what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is.

Thus, as conversations about intersectionality traverse the disciplines of women’s/gender/feminist studies, critical race studies, and women-of-color feminism in a centripetal fashion, we would hope that bridges will continue to be built into the centrifugal forces of intersectionality. Here we have in mind not only the efforts of those referenced above, who explicitly seek to further the project of intersectionality, but also a broader range of efforts to specify theoretically the overlapping dynamics of race, gender, and class.<sup>4</sup> Casting the net wider still, we might expand our conception of intersectional methods to include the integration of projects that bring crucial theoretical, methodological, and substantive resources to studies of intersectionality. A recent example of this approach is Dorothy Roberts’s book *Fatal Intervention* (2011), which relies heavily on medical and other scientific research across the disciplines to support her argument against the use of race in genetic research. Similarly, demographic and other empirical studies of immigration, incarceration, and welfare reform have obvious implications for the ambitious intersectional model of freedom from “population control” that Dean Spade constructs in his contribution to this issue (2013, 1031), as do social movement research and theory (in politics, sociology, and history) for accounts of intersectional politics (Carastathis 2013; Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin 2013).

The future of intersectionality studies will thus, we argue, be dependent on the rigor with which scholars harness the most effective tools of their trade to illuminate how intersecting axes of power and inequality operate to our collective and individual disadvantage and how these very tools,

<sup>4</sup> For example, Carole Pateman and Charles Mills (2007) compare and contrast the racial and gender contracts that both intersect and diverge in the practices of philosophy and law.



these ways of knowing, may also constitute structures of knowledge production that can themselves be the object of intersectional critique. Of course, efforts to think critically about certain conditions often involve active engagement with the analytical conventions and categories that make up those conditions. That there are always elements of power embedded in language, disciplinary methods, metaphors, and other signs is by now a basic understanding that need not stymie the productivity of the field.

As Barbara Tomlinson (2013) reminds us, the search for the new and the perfect in feminist studies—and in the academy in general—often distracts us from what are central organizing theoretical and political themes whose potential lies in their brilliant and rigorous application rather than in theoretical rejection, replacement, reduction, and remediation. We do not see literary or scientific or poststructural or legal or any other kind of method as inherently antithetical (or central) to this enterprise, although we do acknowledge that both critics and practitioners have articulated their interventions from each of these traditions. This broad cast of intersectionality practitioners (and critics) is generative. Indeed, given the widely noted breadth and complexity of the topic—a complexity that is manifested in the challenges of specifying a formal theory of multiple social dynamics as much as in the contingent operation of such dynamics—efforts to articulate a collaborative sensibility may be among the most productive iterations of intersectionality that can facilitate its growth as a field.

### **Articles in this issue: Key themes and central questions**

If the foregoing discussion can be framed as an attempt to address intersectionality at large with an aim toward collaboration and literacy rather than unity, this section attempts to zero in on some issues that we believe have occupied a privileged place in the field from the very start (at least in our own minds) as well as on key questions that will define the field in the future. We seek to foreground the social dynamics and relations that constitute subjects, displacing the emphasis on the subjects (and categories) themselves as the starting point of inquiry. Our focus also shifts into the realm of politics, mostly but not completely outside the halls of academic knowledge production, as we encounter the various ways that intersectionality is put into practice in human rights law, in antidiscrimination policy, and in social movements and advocacy organizations. Our ultimate aim is to further the discussion of some of the theoretical themes raised above through our discussion of these studies of intersectionality in action and thereby to critically assess where the work might need to go over the next two decades.

***Structural intersectionality: Reclaiming power dynamics***

Intersectionality is inextricably linked to an analysis of power, yet one challenge to intersectionality is its alleged emphasis on categories of identity versus structures of inequality. While this theme has surfaced in a variety of texts, particularly those that might be framed as projects that seek intersectionality's rescue, in this issue we emphasize an understanding of intersectionality that is not exclusively or even primarily preoccupied with categories, identities, and subjectivities. Rather, the intersectional analysis foregrounded here emphasizes political and structural inequalities.

The recasting of intersectionality as a theory primarily fascinated with the infinite combinations and implications of overlapping identities from an analytic initially concerned with structures of power and exclusion is curious given the explicit references to structures that appear in much of the early work.<sup>5</sup> Within academic as well as political discourse, Black feminism emphasized the role of structures in constituting the conditions of life in which racially and economically marginalized women were situated.<sup>6</sup> "Structural intersectionality" further delineated the "multilayered and routinized forms of domination" (Crenshaw 1991, 1245) in specific contexts such as violence against women. The analysis of the overlapping structures of subordination revealed how certain groups of women were made particularly vulnerable to abuse and were also vulnerable to inadequate interventions that failed to take into account the structural dimensions of the context (Crenshaw 1991; Richie 2012).

Departing from this work, however, critiques of intersectionality's supposed reification of categories often reflect distorted understandings of identity politics. Attentiveness to identity, if simultaneously confronting power, need not be interpreted so narrowly. As deployed by many intersectional academics and activists, intersectionality helps reveal how power works in diffuse and differentiated ways through the creation and deployment of overlapping identity categories. As Jennifer Jihye Chun, George Lipsitz, and Young Shin pithily observe, "[Intersectionality] primarily concerns the way things work rather than who people are" (2013, 923). Indeed, as contributors herein suggest, the opposition between identity and power is itself a rigid and nondynamic way of understanding social hierarchy. Catharine A. MacKinnon notes that identities are, of course, "authentic instruments of inequality. And they are static and hard to move" (2013, 1023). But, addressing the sometimes mystifying relationships between structures

<sup>5</sup> We acknowledge that some of our work may have inadvertently fostered this emphasis by including a discussion of categories within a broader framework (e.g., McCall 2005).

<sup>6</sup> See Dill (1983), King (1989), Combahee River Collective (1995), and Glenn (2002).

and identities, MacKinnon further observes that identities and stereotypes “are the ossified outcomes of the dynamic intersection of multiple hierarchies, not the dynamic that creates them. They are there, but they are not the reason they are there” (1023).

Barbara Tomlinson also frames intersectionality as an engagement with power, repudiating lines of argument that would critique intersectionality as insufficiently attentive to some subjects and overly attentive to others. For example, some critiques of intersectionality are premised on the assumption that the failure to give all intersectional subjects their day in the sun is a fundamental shortcoming of the field, a critique frequently delivered through the “what about white men?” question. Others defend the absence of intersectionality in, for example, whiteness studies as a logical extension of intersectionality’s exclusive focus on subordinated subjects. Both critiques are premised on understanding identity as the playing field of intersectionality and difference as its perpetual dynamic. As Tomlinson notes, however, “If critics think intersectionality is a matter of identity rather than power, they cannot see which differences make a difference. Yet it is exactly our analyses of power that reveal which differences carry significance” (2013, 1012).

Dean Spade is similarly critical of discourses that confuse the relationship between identity and power. Traditional liberal discourses tend to frame the problem of discrimination in terms of state failures to transcend difference, while race- and gender-neutral regimes escape scrutiny. Spade challenges liberal equality regimes by revealing how allegedly race- and gender-neutral legal and administrative systems fundamentally produce and maintain race and gender categories that ultimately distribute life chances. Like earlier critical race theorists and critical legal scholars, Spade decidedly rejects formal equality approaches in favor of a “population control” lens that reveals the legal system’s complicity with the foundational violences of slavery, genocide, and heteropatriarchy (2013, 1031). Beyond the critique of formal equality, however, Spade argues that resistance conceived through single-axis frameworks can never transform those conditions. Spade uses intersectionality-informed resistance strategies to reject legal equality and to emphasize instead a strategy focused on “dismantling the violent capacities of racialized-gendered systems that operate under the pretense of neutrality” (1033).

The relation between structural interventions and identity categories is also central to Mieke Verloo’s contribution, which interrogates European Union policies that address the (re)production of inequalities for members of intersectional groups competing over resources and (dominant) gender-egalitarian norms and laws, as gender equality regimes are the leading tem-



plate for other equality regimes. While Verloo acknowledges not only the limitations of policy to “bring forward gender equality” (2013, 898) but also the chance that policy may reproduce or sustain inequality instead, her deeper critique does not reject formal equality *per se*. Rather, she attributes the preservation of inequality to the social construction of categorical pairs that repeatedly classify (and reclassify) people into “two exclusive and exclusionary groups” (896)—for example, male/female, black/white, citizen/noncitizen—thus expressing what we might call a form of structural realism.

Verloo’s essay situates the relationship between power and identity in intersectionality studies within political processes of inclusion and exclusion. Specifically, she examines the procedural enactment of intersectional politics—the point at which states have determined what to do but now must decide whom to include in the political processes that enact these changes. Pointing to recent developments in Britain and France, Verloo argues that reforming regimes that build their “analys[es] of intersectionality on the politics of institutional policy rather than on identity” may limit the space available for ethnic minorities to “make complex and intersectional social justice claims” (2013, 906).<sup>7</sup> Here, as Verloo explains it, we see the difference that a politics driven by recognition and inclusion of cognizable identities can make in including marginalized persons in the acts of demarginalization or, as is the case in Britain and France, once again leaving them (and, as Spade would argue, all of us) behind. In other words, recognition may be the most effective solution to problems of exclusion, at least in the short run, even among multiple subordinate communities competing over limited antidiscrimination resources.

Further exploring the relationship between identity and power, Gail Lewis’s piece, “Unsafe Travel: Experiencing Intersectionality and Feminist Displacements,” raises central questions about the structural dynamics at play in the reproduction of power both within society and within the academy itself. Lewis takes up the deflection of race within intersectionality’s travels, specifically arguing that Black women have been displaced from feminist dialogues about intersectionality in Europe. Lewis argues that a key factor in this displacement is a sense that race is a meaningful analytic category only in Britain and the United States and not in continental Europe. While some feminists point to the relatively marginal role of racial discourse within both academic discourses and political discourses in Europe as evidence, little attention is directed to the structural and historical conditions that underwrite this erasure. Lewis notes that “the position that race is unutterable and without analytic utility in the contemporary European context can be

<sup>7</sup> Verloo takes the second part of this quotation from Bassel and Emejulu (2010, 517).



experienced as an act of epistemological and social erasure—erasure both of contemporary realities of intersectional subjects (including racialization of whiteness) and of the history of racial categories and racializing processes across the whole of Europe” (2013, 887).

Lewis can be read as arguing for retaining race and racial power as central analytical and political concepts in the study of intersectionality. Such retention would entail both a structural analysis of race in Europe as well as the acknowledgment of racialized subjects in society and in the production of feminist knowledge. Lewis calls for an inclusive and open-ended definition of the subjects of intersectionality theory and yet, at the same time, for the centrality of race (along with gender, class, etc.) as a determinant of social inequality and subordination in Europe and “elsewhere” (2013, 884).

***Political intersectionality: Praxis methodology and grounded theory***

In the “Engaging Intersectionality” section above, we discussed intersectionality’s deployment as a deconstructive move challenging the sameness/difference paradigms in law, politics, and civil society. This dimension of intersectionality is sometimes mobilized to repudiate any potential embrace of social categorization, yet intersectionality has also figured as a reconstructive move to combat synergistic and formidable structures of subordination. The reconstructive move challenges the position of privilege that enables an easy cynicism about all identities per se and, thus, about politics in general. Key to the reconstructive understanding of intersectionality is the notion that “all politics are identity politics” (Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin 2013, 937).

The concept of “political intersectionality” reflects a dual concern for resisting the systemic forces that significantly shape the differential life chances of intersectionality’s subjects and for reshaping modes of resistance beyond allegedly universal, single-axis approaches. Political intersectionality provides an applied dimension to the insights of structural intersectionality by offering a framework for contesting power and thereby linking theory to existent and emergent social and political struggles. This praxis orientation demands that the realm of practice always already inform the work of theorists. Possibilities for fusing the development of theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge come from several of the articles in this issue.

MacKinnon’s illustration of intersectionality as a method of legal analysis in a wide range of cases involving harms to women in minority communities is one such example with both theoretical and practical implications. MacKinnon’s interpretation of intersectionality as a dynamic

method of analyzing multiple axes of power and inequality in whatever form (time, place) they happen to be manifested and her compelling demonstrations of the false dichotomy between the particular and the universal evince insights that capture and advance the essence of previous work on intersectionality. For instance, the role that the rape of Bosnian women played in helping to prosecute war crimes against the Bosnian community as a whole is an example of how allegedly particular harms to women serve in fact as harms to the broader community (MacKinnon 2013). Similarly, one can think of the women-in-development movement, explored by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2013), which targets women as the optimal locus of economic, social, and political development projects.

Both of these examples represent hard-fought political battles to bring women in disadvantaged communities “from margin to center” (hooks 1984) while at the same time challenging and elaborating on theoretical distinctions (such as distinctions between the particular and the universal) and extending the community of scholars and scope of scholarship by applying intersectional insights beyond the spatial, temporal, and categorical bounds of Crenshaw’s earlier work. Yet we think there is no guarantee that all instances of intersectional contestation will evince these same dynamics (i.e., the same instantiation of the tension between the particular and the universal).

Additional theoretical lessons can be gleaned by putting intersectionality into practice in social movement organizations. One set of questions has to do with how identities, awareness, and transformation are fostered within organizations that attend to a diverse array of issues and power differentials among members. This phenomenon perhaps presents a unique challenge to intersectionally based social organizations and surely warrants greater empirical and theoretical attention. For instance, what do such organizations teach us about how social movements shape political action more generally?

Devon W. Carbado argues that explicit attention to multiple dimensions of privilege and difference is necessary to develop awareness about a whole spectrum of subordinated histories and struggles and, thus, to form coalitions that are potentially broader in impact than those that do not do so. Coining the term “colorblind intersectionality,” he shows how “framing whiteness outside intersectionality legitimizes a broader epistemic universe in which the racial presence, racial difference, and racial particularity of white people travel invisibly and undisturbed as race-neutral phenomena over and against the racial presence, racial difference, and racial particularity of people of color” (2013, 823–24). Carbado’s deployment of intersectionality puts a name on a phenomenon well established within resistance politics, specifically, the way that a white woman “can simultaneously be just a woman

and stand in for all women, just as white men can be just men and stand in for all men, and white gays and lesbians can be just gays and lesbians and stand in for all gays and lesbians” (823). Colorblind intersectionality invites attention to the privileged intersectionalities among politicized constituencies, providing a conceptual account that attends to the unrecognized intersections that underwrite many of the divisions and competing agendas within political movements for greater equality.<sup>8</sup>

Anna Carastathis (2013) incorporates some of this intuition in her analysis of a single organization and a vital player in that organization. In examining how different fragments of a poor, lesbian, Puerto Rican activist’s identity emerged and coalesced in the process of working with various women’s and Central American solidarity groups, Carastathis demonstrates that an intersectional identity is not ready-made—as could be said of all identities—and thus opens possibilities for forging connections among these fragments in myriad ways. She explicitly builds on the notion, expressed in Crenshaw’s “Mapping the Margins” (1991), that traditional identity groups might best be thought of as coalitions. This insight directly imports the idea of sifting and struggling through difference and privilege vis-à-vis the dynamics involved in movements that cross multiple divides (e.g., women’s and queer concerns in Central American solidarity movements) in the process of arriving at a political higher ground, though not one devoid of ongoing conflict.

Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin similarly reveal the organic nature of identity formation in an intersectionally based organization dedicated to the needs of Asian immigrant women. In a more traditional single-axis organization, potential barriers to organizing—such as child-care responsibilities, household burdens, language proficiency, and unmet health-care needs—might be viewed as personal problems that fall within the realm of individual members to resolve. In contrast, Asian Immigrant Women’s Advocates (AIWA) embraces the “intersectional optics” of low-wage immigrant women workers’ lives (2013, 920) to develop a model for leadership development and communal empowerment called the Community Transformational Organizing Strategy (CTOS). Through AIWA’s workplace literacy classes, for example, members may avail themselves of not only basic English-as-a-second-language instruction but also an innovative curriculum that emphasizes workers’, women’s, and immigrants’ rights, allowing them to better understand the link between language proficiency and workplace discrimi-

<sup>8</sup> Carbado also takes up the erasure of racial power in relationship to intersectionality in an interesting juxtaposition to Lewis’s reflection on how blackness is expelled from certain European discourses around intersectionality. That is, Carbado excavates the erasure of whiteness from intersectional consciousness. See Carbado (2013) and Lewis (2013).



nation that is exacerbated by employer expectations that limited-English-speaking, low-income immigrant women will not resist exploitation or harassment.

The CTOS approach embraces an important insight of intersectionality: that diffuse and differential systems of interlocking oppressions combine to marginalize and silence immigrant women workers by imposing multiple barriers to those seeking to participate in their own liberation. The AIWA study reveals not only that structural intersectionality is needed to understand how such differentiated power works but also that political intersectionality is needed to negotiate new identity formations in progressive movements: “Progressive politics do not flow magically from aggrieved identities. On the contrary, it is important for progressive politics that people derive their identities from their politics rather than their politics from their identities, that activists recognize the need to give progressive new meanings based on political principles to embodied social identities” (Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin 2013, 937). The strength of the studies by Carastathis and by Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin lies in their ability to demonstrate how developing awareness of inequalities along multiple dimensions is achieved organically over time. These contributions suggest that intersectional prisms can inform connections across privilege as well as subordination to better facilitate meaningful collaboration and political action.

Finally, in the realm of state policy, our contributors also foster a dialogue between politics and theory. Verloo’s piece, for instance, complements and shines light on much of the work being done by Spade in “Intersectional Resistance and Law Reform.” Within Verloo’s framework, Spade embraces a reactive approach, invoking a call to arms for those committed to “intersectional politics,” insisting that they refuse to settle for pyrrhic “equality ‘victories’” (2013, 1047). Spade’s approach identifies how structures in government and society create unequal life opportunities for certain groups or kinds of people who experience intersectional oppressions, and it calls for the all-out dismantling of these regimes. As Spade sees it, marginalized and oppressed people can and should form alliances—tied together by their similar experiences of oppression, even where the genesis of these oppressions does not have a common link—to collaboratively fight to tear down structural regimes that serve to oppress peoples across multiple axes. “Intersectional politics” does not, for Spade, mean dismantling identities or categories themselves but, rather, dismantling structures that selectively impose vulnerability upon certain bodies. To this end, Spade’s politics and his particular deployment of the reactive approach are expansive in scope: he does not merely articulate a means of liberating trans persons from the tyranny of gender normativity and the gender binary, nor immigrants and others from



the harshness of racism. Rather, Spade argues that in order for all people to resist domination, all groups must work to dismantle systems everywhere that serve to constitute oppression.

***Intersectional knowledge production in women's and gender studies***

Coming full circle to our earlier discussion of the politics of knowledge production, we can restate now that not only do intersectional prisms excavate and expose multilayered structures of power and domination by adopting a grounded praxis approach; they also engage the conditions that shape and influence the interpretive lenses through which knowledge is produced and disseminated.

Tomlinson, for instance, explores how “uninterrogated scholarly and social conventions and habits of argument” combine to distort the power and potential of intersectionality (2013, 993). Some of these social conventions include the nature of academic publishing itself, replete with “professional pressures, reward structures, and credentialing mechanisms” (997). Drawing insights from the work of Robyn Wiegman (2010), Tomlinson argues that feminist scholarship may be particularly vulnerable to such a distorting lens. Because feminism cultivates a desire to change the world, it in turn produces a necessary dissatisfaction with the status quo. Short of changing the world, this desire/dissatisfaction too often turns inward, toward the feminist community and feminist scholarship in particular. Tomlinson identifies the rhetorics and tropes framed by this “desire to distance” (2013, 998) in selected works by authors disappointed or disillusioned with intersectionality. Her work is especially important for understanding more fully the language of and context for such distancing moves, as well as for learning to take this dynamic into account when strategizing about how to build a collaborative and progressive epistemic community. It is important to consider the intersectional project a communal one, one undertaken not in academic silos but in conjunction with fellow travelers with shared insights, approaches, and commitments, guiding critique and collaboration for communal gain (rather than purely self-gain), as suggested in the template for collaborative intersectionality discussed above.

Both Mohanty and Vrushali Patil address, at a global level, problems that Tomlinson discusses, but in ways that reflect different sensibilities about intersectionality's relationship to white feminism and postcolonial discourse. Mohanty was, of course, among the first to call attention to the transnational, colonial, and imperial dimensions of first-world white feminism. In this issue, she revisits her earlier contributions in light of the transformation of academic culture (and feminist scholarship) under neoliberalism. She argues that neoliberalism has transformed “material and

ideological conditions” (2013, 970) in profound ways that negatively affect radical critique and insurgent knowledges: “Radical theory can in fact become a commodity to be consumed; no longer seen as a product of activist scholarship or connected to emancipatory knowledge, it can circulate as a sign of prestige in an elitist, neoliberal landscape” (971). She maps how her own broadly read and cited works—especially “Under Western Eyes” (1986) and “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited” (2003)—have traveled around the world as a telling example of the pull and force of contemporary neoliberal material and ideological conditions. Her examples trace the discursive and analytic moves undertaken to appropriate her work into hegemonic feminist knowledge production while simultaneously emptying it of its fundamental theoretical commitments to decolonization.

Patil also attends to the knowledge-production processes that can empty a body of work of its more radical content and prospects. Patil observes that even critical work on patriarchy has ignored a central dimension: “the potential and actual interrelationships of historically and geographically specific patriarchies to . . . transterritorial and transnational processes” such as European imperialism and colonialism and neoliberal globalization (2013, 848). This being the case, Patil argues that feminist scholarship must challenge the uncritical acceptance of the nation as the meaningful unit of analysis, unless feminist analysis wishes to remain tethered to the “spatialities and temporalities of colonial modernity” (863).

While Mohanty interrogates the failures of white feminism, the focus of Patil’s assessment is certain failures within intersectionality literature, which, she argues, has eclipsed the discussion of patriarchy in feminist scholarship. Placing intersectional scholarship within the larger context of postcolonial studies, a field whose insights have not yet been fully incorporated into what she terms “domestic intersectionality,” Patil argues that intersectionality scholarship to date has failed to interrogate how transnational dynamics of colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberalism structure and constrain life prospects through processes of racialization and gendering (2013, 850). Closer attention to the manifold ways in which the operations of power at the local level are constituted through the regional, the international, and the global is critical if intersectionality studies is to fulfill its radical potential.

Patil’s call to expand intersectional analysis across multiple sites joins others in seeking to expand intersectionality’s discursive terrain. At the same time, it invites a reconsideration of rhetorics that might, without more nuance, erase the insurgent history of Black women’s transnational activism (Coogan-Gehr 2011; Tomlinson 2013). Problematizing the tendency “to promote transnational feminism over the work of American feminists of color—particularly African American women,” Tomlinson suggests that

feminist scholarship must be wary of practices that render Black women somehow “complicit with imperial fantasies of difference” (1001) while neglecting the documented history of Black women’s activism as transnational feminists working to challenge imperial conquest and exploitation in the United States and abroad.

More broadly, Mohanty and Patil present sharp illustrations of the challenges that complicate efforts to develop the field of intersectionality studies beyond its potentially superficial uptake. Read together, Mohanty and Patil reflect a particularly compelling example of the contradictory dynamics of domestication and repudiation that attend insurgent ideas. Intersectionality figures as a framework that, like Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes” (1986), has been deradicalized and domesticated; in Patil’s view, however, intersectionality has virtually supplanted white feminists’ critique of patriarchy. While Mohanty resists the presumption that the widespread citation of “Under Western Eyes” represents a universal engagement with its critical implications, Patil grants intersectionality a central if not defining role in grounding contemporary feminism’s disengagement with postcolonial discourse. The tensions represented by these critiques are not unique to feminist discourses; the history of insurgent ideas and rhetorical demands from the margins is filled with examples of co-optation or repudiation. For example, as any interrogation of the nearly universal embrace of equal rights discourse in the mid-twentieth century reveals, institutionalized equality practices are at considerable odds with the contextualized understandings of power that gave rise to the demands in the first place. Similarly, efforts to adapt and institutionalize intersectionality within feminist theory, women’s studies, or other contexts must be interpreted through an awareness that the institutionalized embodiment of ideas does not necessarily reflect either serious engagement with them or their inherent limits or potential. One certainly would not restrict the substantive limits of equality discourse based on the practices of contemporary institutions, no matter how full-throated their self-representation as entities committed to equal opportunity might be. Similarly, intersectionality must be interpreted not only or even primarily through its rhetorical presence in various institutional and discursive settings but through its substantive articulation in pursuit of understanding and intervening against the social reproduction of power.

### **Conclusion**

In this introduction to the present collection of essays, we began by surveying the issues that animate debates about the definition of intersectionality. We focused in particular on claims that intersectionality fosters a simplistic notion of difference and a narrow rendering of its essential sub-



ject. We then challenged these claims by considering the interplay of multiple social dynamics and power relations that motivates intersectional studies and that has done so from the start. By focusing on structures of power that constitute subjects in particular sociopolitical formations, we locate intersectional dynamics in social space and time. This does not mean, however, that subjects are simply structural positions. It does mean that debates in intersectional studies will circulate less around categories and identities and more around how those categories and identities (and their specific content) are contingent on the particular dynamics under study or of political interest.

We also called attention to the broad spectrum of intersectionality studies, noting that intersectional insights and frameworks are put into practice in a multitude of ways, from the top down to the bottom up, and in highly contested, complex, and unpredictable fashions. We have an enormous amount to learn about these processes and the impact they can have on future movements and social justice initiatives, as well as on long-standing theoretical questions.<sup>9</sup> Our objective is not to offer pat resolutions to all questions about intersectional approaches but to spark further inquiry into the dynamics of intersectionality both as an academic frame and as a practical intervention in a world characterized by vast inequalities.

As many of the contributors herein demonstrate, further elaboration of intersectionality's theoretical and practical content can be advanced through collaborative efforts across and within disciplines, sectors, and national contexts. Bringing the centrifugal tendencies of scholars situated firmly within their disciplines into conversation with scholars working more at the margins of their disciplines is a vitally important step in developing intersectionality studies as a field and in furthering our understanding of some of the most important issues facing contemporary society.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, it is noteworthy that the first large-scale examination of intersectional antidiscrimination claims in the courts was just published in 2011 (Best et al. 2011; see also Nielson, Nelson, and Lancaster 2010).

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