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### Intersectionality

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### Abstract and Keywords

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the term *intersectionality* has become the key analytic framework through which feminist scholars in various fields talk about the structural identities of race, class, gender, and sexuality. This chapter situates intersectionality within a long history of black feminist theorizing about interlocking systems of power and oppression, arguing that intersectionality is not an account of personal identity but one of power. It challenges feminist theorists, including Robyn Wiegman, Jennifer Nash, and Jasbir Puar, who have attempted to move past intersectionality because of its limitations in fully attending to the contours of identity. The chapter also maps conversations within the social sciences about intersectionality as a research methodology. Finally, it considers what it means for black women to retain paradigmatic status within intersectionality studies, whether doing so is essentialist, and therefore problematic, or whether attempts to move “beyond” black women constitute attempts at erasure and displacement.

Keywords: intersectionality, race, class, gender, neoliberalism, black women, black feminism

In the nearly three decades since black feminist legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality*, a host of debates within feminist theory have ensued about what the term means, the breadth of its intellectual history and genealogies, and the scope of its political possibility. Though intersectionality has taken on a kind of “citational ubiquity” (Wiegman 2012) in academic circles, giving the sense that “everyone” does intersectional work, there seems to be less agreement about what exactly intersectionality is and a growing sense that despite its expansive academic reach, the framework does not sufficiently attend to a range of critical questions. In this chapter, I provide both an overview of Crenshaw’s articulation of intersectionality and a sense of the broader genealogies of black feminist thought from which it emerges. I map the most significant recent arguments against intersectionality in the work of three feminist theorists: Jennifer Nash, Robyn Wiegman and Jasbir Puar. I then attend to the work of theorists who take up intersectionality as a kind of feminist methodology and consider whether this approach solves the problems attributed to intersectional approaches.

Intersectionality emerged in the late 1980s as an analytic frame capable of attending to the particular positionality of black women and other women of color both in civil rights law and within civil rights movements. It is the most visible and enduring contribution that feminism, and in particular black feminism, has made to critical social theory in the last quarter century. Coined and elaborated by Crenshaw in a pair of essays published in 1989 and 1991, the term *intersectionality* asserted an analytic frame that disrupted the tendency in social-justice movements and critical social theorizing “to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis (Crenshaw 1989).” In “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” Crenshaw exposed the problems of this “single-axis” analysis when set against the backdrop of “the multidimensionality of Black women’s experiences.” “This single-axis framework,” she argued, “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” (1989, 140). Calling attention to the manner in which the single-axis framework erased the experiences of black women also exposed the larger challenge that “these problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure” (140). The “intersectional experience,” Crenshaw averred, “is greater than the sum of racism and sexism,” meaning that “any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (140). These observations demanded a total “recasting and rethinking” of existing policy frameworks (140).

In her 1991 article, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color,” Crenshaw revisited intersectionality with respect to its relationship to social constructionist ideas about identity and cultural battles over identity politics. She made clear that intersectionality should not be taken as “some new, totalizing theory of identity” (1991, 1244). Rather intersectionality demonstrated “the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (1245). Explicitly expanding her framework to include both black and Latina women, Crenshaw talked about the relationship between “structural intersectionality” and “political intersectionality.” Structural intersectionality referred to a convergence of “race, gender, and class domination” wherein social interventions designed to ameliorate the results of only racism, or sexism, or poverty would be insufficient to address the needs of a woman of color marginalized by the interaction of all three systems of power. For instance, in addressing domestic violence, “intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who face different obstacles because of race and class” (1246). Political intersectionality, on the other hand, looked outward to “highlight that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas” (1252).

Taken together, Crenshaw’s essays catalyzed a tectonic shift in the nature of feminist theorizing by suggesting that black women’s experiences demanded new paradigms in feminist theorizing, creating an analytic framework that exposed through use of a powerful metaphor exactly what it meant for systems of power to be interactive, and explicitly tying the political aims of an inclusive democracy to a theory and account of power. As an account of power, intersectionality attended to the particular forms of subjugation and subordination that characterized black women’s intersecting and multiplicative (King 1986) experiences of racism and sexism within the law.

After more than a quarter century of traversing feminist academic terrain, there is an increasing concern that intersectionality has outlived its analytic usefulness. Some argue, implicitly rather than explicitly, that its overarching investment in speaking about the social conditions of US black women’s lives militates against its ability to offer a broadly applicable set of theoretical propositions. Others are disillusioned with intersectionality’s inability to fully account for all the exigencies of identity in the face of multiple and proliferating categories of social identity, such as sexuality, nation, religion, age, and ability, in contemporary intersectional discourses. Yet, the political import of paradigms that make the interactive process of social marginalization visible cannot be denied. The institutional transformation of the status of women of color feminisms within the academy is a direct result of the political work that intersectional frames do. Thus, there is a tension about what it might mean to jettison or move *beyond* intersectionality’s theoretical concerns without jettisoning a commitment to its social-justice aims.

Sirma Bilge (2013) notes that “like other ‘traveling theories’ that move across disciplines and geographies, intersectionality falls prey to widespread misrepresentation, tokenization, displacement, and disarticulation. Because the concept of intersectionality emerged as a tool to counter multiple oppressions, there are multiple narratives about its origins, as well as tensions over the legibility of its stakes” (410). Thus, I want to begin with an intellectual genealogy of works by black women thinkers that laid the intellectual groundwork from which Crenshaw launched intersectionality.

### Genealogies

The idea that patriarchy interacts with other systems of power—namely, racism—to uniquely disadvantage some groups of women more than others has a long history within black feminism’s intellectual and political traditions. As early as 1892, Anna Julia Cooper wrote, “[T]he colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country.... She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both” (134). The “woman question” was nineteenth-century shorthand for talking about

the full inclusion of women as legally recognized human beings entitled to property rights and all other rights attaining to citizens. The “race problem” was nineteenth-century shorthand for discussing the cementing of Jim Crow segregation in the post-Reconstruction era. Black women endured the ignobility of both systems, often while confronting crushing poverty too. Even after significant milestones had been reached in the broader women’s movement, black women often found themselves excluded from employment opportunities reserved for white women.

In 1940, Cooper’s colleague and contemporary Mary Church Terrell penned a self-published autobiography with the title *A Colored Woman in a White World*, with the opening lines, “This is the story of a colored woman living in a white world. It cannot possibly be like a story written by a white woman. A white woman has only one handicap to overcome—that of sex. I have two—both sex and race. I belong to the only group in this country, which has two such huge obstacles to surmount. Colored men have only one—that of race” (Terrell [1940] 2005, 29) Terrell argued that these “two such huge obstacles” constituted the “double-handicap” of race and sex (29). She positioned herself in relationship to white women, whose struggles for equal rights had fomented an epic battle in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, and also to black men, whose failure on the basis of racism to attain what Ida B. Wells frequently called “manhood rights” has formed the basis of the long black freedom struggle. The idea that racism and sexism and patriarchy acted in tandem to duly disadvantage black women in the body politic became a mainstay of early feminist theorizing among black women. Over and over again, black women formulated new ways to think and talk about how racism and sexism dovetailed to wall them out of the benefits of citizenship.

In the early 1940s, while she was a student at Howard University Law School, the only woman in her class, famed civil rights activist Pauli Murray coined the term “Jane Crow.” Murray (1987, 183) characterized the male-centered legal culture she encountered in the law school as a culture of “discriminatory sex bias,” a system of “Jane Crow,” which she understood to be “a twin evil” of Jim Crow. In the 1970s, Murray had come to think more specifically about how Jane Crow or sexual bias against black women showed up within the confines of the law. In a groundbreaking essay, “Constitutional Law and Black Women” (Murray, n.d.) she drew a range of parallels between the treatment of blacks and the treatment of women in the law. She concluded that “Black women have an important stake in the present movement to make the guarantee of equal rights without regard to sex the fundamental law of the land” (45). The use of the race-sex analogy became one of Murray’s signal contributions to legal thought and civil rights activism (Mayeri 2011).

Because Murray felt that sexism functioned analogously to racism, she believed that cases brought under the Equal Protection Amendment (the 14th) could alleviate sex discrimination against all women. Though she did not fully factor in that the law was incapable of accounting for black women’s unique position vis-à-vis Jane Crow, she laid the groundwork for legal interventions that emerged two decades later in Crenshaw’s work and the work of other critical race theorists.

In 1970, echoing Terrell’s concept of the “double-handicap” of race and sex, Frances Beale argued that black women were caught in a kind of “double jeopardy” of being both black and female. She described “the black woman in America ... as a ‘slave of a slave,’ ” placed in that position because black women often became the “scapegoat for the evils that this horrendous system has perpetrated on black men (Beale [1970] 1995, 148).” By the mid-1970s the Combahee River Collective was arguing that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking.” Most importantly they argued, “the synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives” (1995, 232).

By the late 1980s, Deborah King revisited Beale’s concept of double jeopardy and Beverly Lindsay’s concept of triple jeopardy, which attempted more explicitly to account for class and to include the experiences of Native American, Chicana, and Asian American women. King (1988, 47) argued that these frameworks fell into the trap of taking an “additive approach” that “ignor[ed] the fact that racism, sexism, and classism constitute three, interdependent control systems,” something that could be better captured in a term like *multiple jeopardy*. “Multiple,” she argued referred “not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well” (47).

Taken together, this body of proto-intersectionality theorizing advanced the idea that systems of oppression—namely, racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism—worked together to create a set of social conditions under which black women and other women of color lived and labored, always in a kind of invisible but ever-present

social jeopardy. Crenshaw built on and brought together this body of black feminist theorizing, when she encountered the legal conundrum of black women who were discriminated against as black women, not only as women and not only as blacks. What she named “intersectionality,” encapsulated and expanded a body of work about a set of social problems that black women thinkers had been grappling with and attempting in various shapes and forms to name for nearly a century. In this regard, Crenshaw’s bringing together of critical race theory with the work of such black feminist theorists as Anna Julia Cooper, Gloria Hull, Barbara Smith, and the women of Kitchen Table Press, as well as the work of Paula Giddings, represented the very kind of interdisciplinarity that has become a hallmark of black feminist theorizing. In the twenty-five years since the publication of these two germinal essays, Crenshaw has continued over the course of several articles to sharpen her intersectional analysis. For instance, she argued in “From Private Violence to Mass Incarceration: Thinking Intersectionally about Women, Race, and Social Control” (2012), that with regard to the growing problem of black and Latina women and mass incarceration, “not only is there no one way that racially marginalized women are subject to overlapping patterns of power, but also women of color are certainly not intersectionality’s only subjects when it comes to social punishment” (1425). Thus, she argues, “intersectional dynamics are not static, but neither are they untethered from history, context, or social identity” (1426). But the core of her work remains about mapping the manner in which power dynamics interact to make black women marginalized by social systems like mass incarceration invisible.

### Intersectional Feminisms

Crenshaw used a discrete set of problems that black women encountered when bringing antidiscrimination lawsuits against their employers to point to the broader challenge of the law’s insufficiency to remedy harm done to people placed along multiple axes of marginalized identities. Although she did not intend it to, her framework, which is at base an account of structural power relationships, offered a way to begin talking about the interaction of these systems of power in the formation of identity. To return to Combahee, black women noted that interactive systems of power “formed the conditions” of their lives. And insofar as material conditions bear some relationship to how one identifies in the world and moves through the world, intersectionality’s implications for reconceptualizing identity have had far-reaching consequences, in particular for the development of feminist studies in the academy.

However, the disjuncture between theories of identity and the intellectual project of intersectionality led to a range of unfortunate consequences as the theoretical framework traveled to other disciplines. The most egregious of these consequences is the tendency to treat intersectionality as a feminist account of identity, despite Crenshaw’s (1991, 1244) very clear assertion that the framework did not constitute some “new, totalizing theory of identity.” So while Crenshaw used intersectionality to demonstrate certain fissures in identity politics and the ways that these kinds of group politics were frequently unable to meet the needs of certain putative members of the group, the theory has been accused of fomenting unhelpful and essentialist kinds of identifications.

In the original formulation of intersectionality, Crenshaw demonstrated that black women’s experiences, while intersectional, were not reducible to intersectional treatments of race and sex, or to any other category, for that matter. Intersectionality was a first, formative step that allowed for recognition of the black female subject within juridical structures of power, where she had heretofore remained invisible and illegible, and thus unable to obtain any kind of justice. Crenshaw’s argument was that *failure* to begin with an intersectional frame would always result in insufficient attention to black women’s experiences of subordination. She did not argue for the converse, namely, that intersectionality would fully and wholly account for the range or depth of black female experiences. Intersectionality constituted a specific paradigm or framework for understanding black women’s subordinated social position and the situated effects of mutually constructing systems of power and oppressions within black women’s lives. Never did her work indicate that intersectionality was an effective tool of accounting for identities at any level beyond the structural. More recently, she has argued that “at the same time that intersectionality transcends an exclusive focus on identity or mere categorization, the lived experiences of racially marginalized women and girls are shaped by a range of social and institutional practices that produce and sustain social categories and infuse them with social meanings” (2012, 1426).

The implicit distinction being made here between personal kinds of identity and structural identities is an important one. The law conceptualizes people through the structural identities of gender, race, sexual orientation, or national origin. These kinds of identities are different from personal identities of the sort that refer to personal taste, personality traits, gender performativity, or intimate and filial relationships. If Crenshaw’s account of

intersectionality is implicated in the project of identity politics at all, it is implicated at the structural level rather than the personal level. However, as an analytic tool it has been erroneously taken up in some feminist academic circles as a totalizing account of identity, and it has proved insufficient for such projects. That in no way implicates the merits of intersectional paradigms, but rather calls into question the epistemic routes through which it has traveled to other places and whether these routes make sense.

In one of the earliest major critiques of intersectionality, legal scholar Peter Kwan argued:

Intersectionality does not pack much of an epistemological punch. In other words, although intersectionality illuminates the ways in which victims of multiple forms of oppression must be recognized as such on their own terms, in and of itself intersectionality tells us little about the fiscal, emotional, psychological, and other conditions nor the subjectivity of those caught in the trajectories of intersecting categories. Intersectionality tells us, for example, that the condition and subjectivity of and hence the legal treatment of Black women is not simply the sum of Blackness and femaleness, but it does not shed much light on what it is nevertheless. Narratives are often used to fill this gap. But narratives provide only empirical data on which the theoretical work remains to be done.

(Kwan 2000, 687)

Kwan is right on one level: knowing about the various intersections that constitute a person's structural position does not mean in fact *knowing* that person as an individual. But Kwan's real critique of intersectionality seems to be not of Crenshaw's articulation, but rather of black feminist standpoint theory, which is invested in an affirmative articulation of a black women's epistemological point of view. Intersectionality is not beholden to a particular epistemological viewpoint. While it brings into focus marginalized people practicing what Nancy Hartsock might call "subjugated knowledges," and while the relations of power intersectionality exposes might be most articulable through the framework of subjugated knowledges, intersectionality does not tether black women to a certain epistemological standpoint. By the time Kwan penned his essay at the end of the 1990s there had already been more than a decade of scholarly dissent among black feminists about the role of standpoint theory in circumscribing and ghettoizing black women's experiences and black feminist knowledge production (Carby 1987; Smith 1998). Still, intersectionality is dogged by critiques of its alleged epistemological and identitarian investments.

Take for instance, the work of black feminist theorist Jennifer Nash. In an essay called "Rethinking Intersectionality," Nash (2008, 4) outlines four central problems or "unresolved questions" with intersectionality: "[T]he lack of a clearly defined intersectional methodology, the use of black women as prototypical intersectional subjects, the ambiguity inherent to the definition of intersectionality, and the coherence between intersectionality and lived experiences of multiple identities." In raising these questions, Nash's "hope is not to dismantle intersectionality" but rather to expose intersectionality's underlying assumptions in order to help scholars "dismantle essentialism," "craft nuanced theories of identity and oppression," and "grapple with the messiness of subjectivity" (4). Current articulations of intersectionality are situated in Nash's work in opposition to the aforementioned goals.

Nash defines intersectionality as "the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality" (2). She further argues that one of the theoretical and political purposes that intersectionality serves for feminist and antiracist scholarship is "to subvert race/gender binaries in service of theorizing identity in a more complex fashion" (2). This definition of intersectionality and articulation of its goals reveals two significant misreadings of intersectionality. The first is that the framework never claimed to be an affirmative assertion about how subjectivity is constituted, but was rather a claim about how certain aspects of one's identity could make them invisible as subjects within the law. The second problem, which is not unique to Nash's work but is, rather, indicative of how intersectionality is now discussed in some feminist circles, is that "vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality," are conflated with a discussion of remedying "racism, sexism, and classism." One set of phrases points to identity categories; the other points to systems of power. Intersectionality is thus assessed as failing to account fully for identity issues from the view that its goal is to "subvert race/gender binaries *in service of theorizing identity in a more complex fashion*" (emphasis added) (2). Undoubtedly, this is how the project of intersectionality has been taken up in feminist studies, and undoubtedly, intersectionality would be found wanting as an epistemological system since it was meant to be a provisional solution to a more specific problem. Nowhere in the genealogies of thought that came to constitute intersectionality do black women ever put

forth the interlocking nature of racism and sexism as the basis for understanding their identity wholly. In fact, they assert just the opposite—namely, that the operations of racism, sexism, and sometimes classism make them civically and juridically *unknowable*. In this case, the solution to the problem of unknowability is not being *known* but being *knowable*. Therefore, we should not conclude that frameworks that attempt to solve the problem of “unknowability,” or what we might call *juridical illegibility* (Carbado 2013, 815), are attempting to help us know anyone. These frameworks attempt to make some aspect of people’s identity *legible*. They attend to the problem of recognition rather than a problem of subjectivity.

Existing structures recognize and provide property rights and protections for a standard white, male, property-owning, heterosexual, able-bodied subject. But bringing into view lives that have been occluded by obtrusive structures, such as racism and sexism, does not then mean that the people living them are now known. It means that the structures making them invisible are now clear and that the negative impact of those structures must be addressed. Feminist theorists must reject any misrepresentations of intersectionality that suggest that the search for a theoretical frame that fully encompasses the bounds of articulable identities takes priority over a framework that sustains critiques of the institutional power arrangements that make those identities invisible and illegible. Intersectionality’s most powerful argument is not that the articulation of new identities in and of itself disrupts power arrangements. Rather, the argument is that institutional power arrangements, rooted as they are in relations of domination and subordination, confound and constrict the life possibilities of those who already live at the intersection of certain identity categories, even as they elevate the possibilities of those living at more legible (and privileged) points of intersection. Thus, while intersectionality should be credited with “lifting the veil,” to invoke Du Bois’s metaphor of the racial “color line,” we should remain clear that the goal of intersectionality is not to provide an epistemological mechanism to bring communities from behind the veil into full legibility. It is rather to rend the veil and make sure that no arguments are articulated to support its reconstruction. Thus political commitments which grow out of intersectionality are rooted in a critical demeanor of vigilance, my riff on Koritha Mitchell’s notion of a “critical demeanor of shamelessness,” (2014) with regard to challenging the ever-shifting machinations of systems that seek to reconstitute and reinscribe dominance.

Barbara Tomlinson (2013, 1000) takes issue with critics, such as Nash, whose work suggests that “intersectionality’s critique of structural power interferes with its more important use for developing general theories of identity.” Tomlinson writes, “Diminishing the role of power in identity formation, such critics demonstrate a desire for individual self-invention, as if history and power no longer have claims on us, as if the significance of identities lies in expressions of subjectivity” (1000). This set of concerns is markedly different “for scholars concerned with antisubordination,” for whom “the experience and subjectivity of specific identities is not really the focus of the argument but rather a proxy or tool to examine and counter structural justice and subordination” (1000). Tomlinson issues a scathing indictment in the form of a warning: “which meaning of identity we are interested in depends on the work we want our work to do” (1000).

The stated desire among intersectionality’s most pointed critics to “not dismantle it” has everything to do with their recognizing that intersectionality is institutionally important for providing the language and justification for a diverse academy. Robyn Wiegman (2012), for example, makes clear that she agrees with the central thrust of Jennifer Nash’s argument and that she has many reservations about intersectionality herself. Nonetheless, we are told that to take her concerns as “an indictment of intersectional analysis is to hear a judgment I do not intend” (250). Rather, Wiegman is concerned not “with measuring the value of the promise that intersectionality makes but with the lessons at stake in fully inhabiting them” (250). Moreover, she argues that Nash’s work “brings to the foreground the significance of the institutional setting in which intersectionality has garnered its critical authority, such that a theory of marginalization can become dominant even when the majority of those represented by its object of study have no access to the ameliorative justice its critical hegemony represents” (299). This assessment of intersectionality’s broad critical reach seems very much to indict it for an inability to achieve “ameliorative justice” on behalf of black women (and perhaps other marginalized groups of color) that it claims to represent. To suggest that intersectionality possesses “critical hegemony” in a world where hegemony always signals a problematic relationship of dominance that needs to be dismantled runs counter to Wiegman’s (and Nash’s) assertions that they are not interested in “judging” or “dismantling” the project of intersectionality. But the fear, it seems, is that to fully “inhabit” the lessons of intersectionality is to prevent ourselves from attending to groups whose experience of marginalization is not akin to black women’s or to suggest erroneously that black women are always, in every case, marginalized. This kind of intersectional conundrum as articulated by Nash and

echoed by Wiegman is a skepticism about “whether all identities are intersectional or whether only multiply marginalized subjects have an intersectional identity” (Nash 2008; Wiegman 2012). Carbado (2013) responds to this particular quibble about which identities are intersectional essentially by noting that *all* identities are intersectional. The theory applies in cases where we are talking about multiply jeopardized or marginalized subjects, but “the theory [also] applies where there is no jeopardy at all. Thus it is a mistake to conceptualize intersectionality as a ‘race to the bottom’ ” (814). The theory seeks to map the top of social hierarchies as well. By suggesting that intersectionality has a range of problems to which it cannot attend, some critics artificially circumscribe the limits of what the theory can perform. This need to displace intersectionality while claiming a desire to keep it intact in some greatly altered form is absolutely a function of market-driven, neoliberal forms of academic knowledge production and the sense that academics must always say something new. It is therefore bizarre when critics suggest that it is intersectionality itself, and not the impulses seeking to displace intersectional frames, that acts as a tool of neoliberal collusion, despite a continuing need for its political project within institutions.

The argument that the way intersectionality accounts for identity and its indebtedness to stable intact categories reproduce juridical structures that collude with neoliberal and imperialist projects emerges in the work of Jasbir Puar. In her groundbreaking *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Puar (2007, 212) argues for new formulations of identity that don’t begin and end with intersectionality: “As opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes that components—race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion—are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate, time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency.” Puar deploys Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (2001, 6) conception of assemblage, which they define as a “multiplicity” that has “neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions.” They go on to say that “there are no points or positions ... such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines.” In other words, assemblage is a way of describing relationships between constitutive entities that does not assume either an overarching system or structure, or a shared set of roots or genealogies. Puar suggests that this conception is more favorable than intersectionality, which

demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative aspects of identification: you become an identity, yes, but also timelessness works to consolidate the fiction of a seamless stable identity in every space.

(Puar 2007, 212)

One immediate problem with this account is that the black body has never been conceived as being capable of linearity and coherency, and certainly not of permanency, particularly when it comes to institutionalized and official knowledges. Moreover, since the earliest days of intersectional theorizing, Patricia Hill Collins (1998) has stridently rejected the logic of equivalence that inheres in some work on intersectionality, writing that “continuing to leave intersectionality as an undertheorized construct contributes to old hierarchies (and some new ones) being reformed under ... a new myth of equivalent oppressions” (211). She says, “[I]f all oppressions mutually construct one another, then we’re all oppressed in some way by something—oppression talk obscures unjust power relations” (211). Moreover, Rebecca Clark-Mane (2012, 92) argues that this logic of equivalence, this “flattening and proliferation of difference,” is part of syntax of whiteness that inheres in third-wave or contemporary feminist theorizing. So a “stabilizing” of black identity across time and space might be politically attractive in the US context insofar as it creates the conditions for the protection of one’s rights as a citizen. But this would require leaving an analysis not only of race as identity but also of racism as a system of power at the forefront of analyses of intersectionality, a point I will return to shortly.

Puar (2007, 215) continues her indictment of intersectionality by arguing that “intersectionality privileges naming, visibility, epistemology, representation, and meaning, while assemblage underscores feeling, tactility, ontology, affect, and information.” Because assemblages attempt to “comprehend power beyond disciplinary regulatory models,” in Puar’s estimation they are more adept at “work[ing] against narratives of U.S. exceptionalism that secure empire, [by] challenging the fixity of racial and sexual taxonomies that inform practices of state surveillance and control” (215). Although Puar contends (like Nash and Wiegman) that she does not want to do away with intersectionality but only to supplement and complicate it through the introduction of the assemblage,

the claims that intersectionality is complicit with US imperialism, that it is overly beholden to what Wiegman terms the “juridical imaginary,” and that it replicates taxonomies of violence are nothing short of devastating. Moreover, to recast the desire of marginalized US subjects for state-based recognition as a collusion with empire suggests a troubling misunderstanding of the differing material realities of those who benefit from empire and those whose lives and labor and marginalization buttress the foundation of violence upon which the empire is built.

Yet, Puar writes, “as a tool of diversity management and a mantra of liberal multiculturalism, intersectionality colludes with the disciplinary apparatus of the state—census, demography, racial profiling, surveillance—in that ‘difference’ is encased within a structural container that simply wishes the messiness of identity into a formulaic grid” (212). In Puar’s formulation, state recognition is an inherently limiting thing to want, because the desire for recognition vis-à-vis official channels reinscribes the authority of the state. But if, in the case of racialized others in the United States, for instance, the state is already interpellating identities in violent ways, then asking for recognition on different terms constitutes not collusion but dissent from various forms of state-based violence, both physical and discursive. Crenshaw (2012, 1452) argues in the case of mass incarceration that “some of the discursive spaces most vulnerable to neoliberal occupation have been those where feminist and antiracist commitments have been weakened by their failure to address the intersectional dimensions of violence and social control.” In other words, to lose sight of structural systems of power and their varied interactions is to enable “neoliberal occupation” of putative social justice discourses. To suggest, for instance, that the desire for intersectional recognition in the law means that working-class communities of color are acquiescing to the overpolicing and surveillance of their bodies and communities assumes that lack of recognition and the invisibility that comes with it somehow constitutes a form of “protection” for black and brown people. That kind of analysis also suggests that intersectionality is implicated in obscuring rather than exposing the massive kinds of state surveillance that characterizes life in communities of color. This is simply not the case. Where protection of one’s body is tied to being a recognizable category, the idea that people of color should not want categorizations and the protections they afford is short-sighted. And because intersectionality can consider a range of different ways in which modes of power intersect in these instances, it offers tools for dismantling these systems not reifying them.

Because US-based intersectionality does seek to understand circulations of juridical power, it would be problematic to impose dominant US identity categories in other national or transnational contexts. But if it is true that intersectionality’s primary concern is to expose the way circulations of power enable or disable articulations of identity, rather than to offer better language through which to express and make subjectivity legible, then the suggestion that intersectionality colludes with rather than exposes power seems to be misplaced. Puar (2012) returns to this critique of intersectionality as a tool of US imperialism in another essay, called “I’d Rather Be a Cyborg Than a Goddess: Becoming Intersectional in Assemblage Theory.” Here, she argues that intersectionality falls victim to certain “geopolitical problems”:

[T]ransnational and postcolonial scholars continue to point out that the categories privileged by intersectional analysis do not necessarily traverse national and regional boundaries nor genealogical exigencies, presuming and producing static epistemological renderings of categories themselves across historical and geopolitical locations. Indeed many of the cherished categories of the intersectional mantra, originally starting with race, class, gender, now including sexuality, nation, religion, age, and disability, are the product of modernist colonial agendas and regimes of epistemic violence, operative through a western/euro-american epistemological formation through which the whole notion of discrete identity has emerged.

(Puar 2012, 54)

In other words, intersectionality relies on the production and reproduction of fixed identity categories that are tethered to the apparatuses of the nation-state, which is itself a problematic category and social formation, in order to make any interventions. Essentially, the argument here is that in seeking to remedy one kind of epistemic violence—namely, that against black women—intersectionality proliferates a variety of other kinds of violence against other women of color subjects.

Puar (2012) offers her own intervention to remedy the limitations of intersectionality through recourse again to the Deleuzean notion of assemblage. Intersectional identities, she tells us, “are the byproducts of attempts to still and quell the perpetual motion of assemblages, to capture and reduce them, to harness their threatening mobility” (50).



I want to register two concerns about this move. First, I concur with Devon Carbado (2013) that formulations such as Kwan's cosynthesis and Puar's assemblages are "no more dynamic than intersectionality" because they all grow out of a common problem: "[T]here are discursive limitations to our ability to capture the complex and reiterative processes of social categorization. The very articulation of the idea that race and gender are co-constitutive, for example discursively fragments those categories—into race and gender—to make that point. The strictures of language require us to invoke race, gender, sexual orientation, and other categories one discursive moment at a time" (816). To then suggest that this amounts to a reproduction of the fixity of these categories is false.

Second, Puar argues that intersectional identities "attempt to quell" the "mobility" of assemblages. To acknowledge that fixity is an essentializing fiction does not deny either the very real realities of fixed or declining social positions or the ways that the matrix of domination (Collins [1990] 2000), acts very much like a spider's web that captures and immobilizes its prey. The concept of mobility should itself be problematized as being the property of certain embodied subjects. Intersectionality makes the disciplinary apparatus of the state visible and theorizes the way legal constructions continually produce categories of bodies existing outside the limits of legal protection. In other words, the ways in which juridical structures affix narratives of criminality to black male bodies (or brown bodies), for instance, Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis, on the basis of a very particular race-gender schema, works to limit the mobility of these kinds of bodies in public and private space. In the end, even Puar concedes these realities and opts for some unarticulated possibility of bridging the two frameworks:

[To] dismiss assemblage in favor of retaining intersectional identitarian frameworks is to miss the ways in which societies of control apprehend and produce bodies as information, ... to render intersectionality as an archaic relic of identity politics then partakes in the fantasy of never-ending inclusion of capacity-endowed bodies, bypassing entirely the possibility that for some bodies—we can call them statistical outliers, or those consigned to premature death, or those once formerly considered useless bodies or bodies of excess—discipline and punish may well still be the primary mode of power apparatus.

(Puar 2012, 63)

### **The Paradigmatic Black Female Subject**

This tension about the way intersectionality purportedly limits the ability of scholars to develop frameworks that more fully account for subjectivity leads to a central question: What is the status of the black female subject in a world where the theoretical paradigm that has made her the most visible is indicted for making the identities of other marginalized groups invisible? Because Crenshaw constructed the intersectional proposition on the ground of black women's erasure in civil rights law, intersectionality has come to stand in as a kind academic and/or theoretical pronoun, whose antecedent is, or has at different turns been, black women, the black woman, and the black female experience. It has also become central to the intellectual scope of black feminism as an institutional project. Literary scholar Valerie Smith (1998, xxiii) has argued that "there is no black feminism without intersectionality."

There is therefore no denying that institutional endorsement of intersectional frameworks has made unprecedented space for the intellectual production of academic works by and about black women. However, unsubstantiated claims that intersectionality must always be about black women presume, as Devon Carbado (2013, 813) notes, that black women cannot "function as the backdrop for the genesis and articulation of a generalizable framework about power and marginalization." As Carbado goes on to explain, "many of the articles on intersectionality focus squarely on black women or on race and gender. Surely, however, that is not, in itself, a problem. It is becoming increasing[ly] unspeakable (dubbed theoretically backward, monopolistic, identitarian, categorically hegemonic, etc.) to frame theoretical and political interventions around black women.... It is part of a larger ideological scene in which blackness is permitted to play no racial role in anchoring claims for social justice" (814). Indeed, there is disagreement among feminist scholars about whether this is in fact the case. Nikol Alexander-Floyd (2012, 19) argues that "intersectionality research must be properly understood as the purview of scholars investigating women of color." She rejects the view that this is an endorsement of essentialism because intersectionality allows women of color to "contest and refashion" embattled identity categories. To the extent that intersectionality makes systems of power that disadvantage other groups visible, the idea that its theoretical and analytic scope should be

limited to women of color seems parochial. But we should caution against any moves to evacuate or relegate to the margins women of color from the intellectual trajectories of their own knowledge production. And we should recognize that part of what it means to have women of color doing knowledge production is that their particular positionality enables a different view of the way that many other groups move through power structures and not just themselves.

Still for feminist scholars such as Wiegman, black women anchor intersectionality to a kind of particularity that seems difficult to overcome. As intersectionality circulates in the academy, Wiegman argues that

the particularity of black women's identity position functions as the formative ground for a critical practice aimed at infinite inclusion. The leaps engaged here are most arresting if set in slower motion. On what terms, for instance can the commitment to particularity take paradigmatic shape without sacrificing its force as a counter to universalizing tendencies? Or more to the point, how can particularity retain the specificity it evokes when the destination it inscribes is to render practice not simply coherent but comprehensive in its analytic capacity and scope? Both of these questions point to the tension between intersectionality as a commitment to the particularity of black women's minoritization and its redeployment as the means to claim paradigmatic mastery over both the experiences of women of color and identity's historical, social, political, and psychic complexity as a whole.

(Wiegman 2012, 242)

It seems that what Wiegman points to is a problem of what she terms the "redeployment" of intersectionality rather than a problem of the framework itself. Moreover, it is intersectionality that exposed the limitations of single-axis frameworks that presumed a kind of paradigmatic mastery over experience. Still, she and Puar are correct that it is unfair to saddle intersectionality with the challenge of accounting for the experience of all groups. The problem is that critiques of the epistemological limitations of intersectionality frequently cast intersectionality as something either that has been achieved or something that is wholly unachievable. This discourse in which intersectionality "is 'hailed' and 'failed' simultaneously" is part of a neoliberal push in which "some elements of intersectionality are taken into account, but only to be declared lapsed or obsolete, to be set aside for something better" (Bilge 2013, 407). In either case, the search is for some new paradigm that can do what intersectionality cannot do. But we should remain skeptical of newer approaches to identity that take as their centerpiece a fundamental belief that the particularity of black women's experiences exempt black women from being the foundation on which broadly applicable theoretical frames can be built. This desire to move on from intersectionality bears the spectre of a troubling desire to *move on* from discussions of black women. That kind of move matters not simply theoretically but also institutionally, since it would have the effect of using a theory rooted in the experiences of black women as the sine qua non of feminism's achievement of institutional diversity while potentially marginalizing black women in the academy who have made space for themselves largely based on the intellectual cachet afforded to intersectionality.

According to Wiegman, it is intersectionality's relationship to a paradigmatic black female subject that creates the need for a new analytic frame. Intersectionality is mired in an analytic impasse whereby "its figural resolution as a comprehensive, inclusive, and multidimensional approach to the intersections of race and gender not only renders 'Black women's experience' paradigmatic, but stakes intersectional reason on the force of the protocols of paradigmatic reading it hones" (248). It seems here that this is really an argument against the use of experience as the basis for theorizing, because no experience can be taken as paradigmatic without apparently doing violence to the experiences of people who are differently placed. But intersectionality does not argue that black women's experiences are wholly paradigmatic for all experiences of social marginalization. Rather, it captures the parts of black women's common experiences and suggests that these experiences illumine the experiences of others marginalized vis-à-vis intersecting categories. Moreover, black feminist engagements with and critiques of standpoint theory and its attendant epistemologies are as old as intersectionality itself (Carby 1987; Collins 1998; Smith 1997). Yet Wiegman (2012, 250) concludes that "in exacting its obligation to the figure that compels its analysis [the black woman], intersectionality becomes enthralled to an object of study that must conform to the shape of its critical desires, which is to say to the shape of the authority it draws from her perspective and social position in order to confer on her the very epistemological priority and legal autonomy it promises to her." In other words, intersectionality prescribes what it claims to only name or describe. But Carbado (2013) warns that those who falsely impose these kinds of limits on intersectionality are the ones who are prescribing what they claim only

to describe. Moreover, all of these critics accede to the politics of diversity and inclusion that buttress calls for intersectionality—hence their reluctance to move on from it. In response to such reluctance, Tomlinson (2013, 996) warns that “critics assume that their task is to critique intersectionality, not to foster intersectionality’s ability to critique subordination.” At the risk of being too prescriptive of the task of the feminist critic, I would add the caveat that those feminist theorists who claim an investment in challenging structures of power that lock marginalized subjects out should rethink the role of their criticism regarding intersectionality.

Because intersectionality’s biggest success within feminist studies is largely estimated to be its exposure of the nonessentialist nature of gender identity, its role in helping us to understand racial formation remains nebulous. The fact that intersectionality has seemingly successfully named and exposed the problem of racism and white privilege in feminism has emboldened a new generation of scholars to become postintersectional. Like post-feminist discourses that positively invoke feminism and cite the prevalence of feminist discourses to prove that there is no longer a need for feminism, post-racial discourses use the neoliberal language of diversity to prove that we are either beyond racism or that racism happens in individualist and isolated incidences. Broad systemic racism is no longer a problem, and one of the ways that we continue to promote racism is to remain invested in the fictive category of race and racialized discourses. The desire to become *postintersectional* is bound up with these post-racial and post-feminist moves. Postintersectional discourses and analyses take the pervasiveness (or citational ubiquity) of intersectionality in the academy (and now also in feminist social media) to be evidence that it has achieved its goals, become outdated, and beckons for something new. Further, they insist that a continued focus on the outmoded categories that inhere in intersectional analysis elides other peoples and problems and prohibits progress. The turn to intersectionality as methodology is one concrete way that intersectionality has attempted to get beyond its implicit connections to a black female embodied subject.

### Intersectionality as Methodology

One way in which scholars have attempted to demonstrate the broader usefulness of intersectionality beyond its import for black women is by employing it as a research paradigm. In her book *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings*, literary scholar Valerie Smith (1998, xv) rejects black feminism as a “biologically grounded positionality,” arguing instead that black feminism vis-à-vis intersectionality “provide[s] strategies of reading simultaneity.” She proposes that the critic can “read intersectionally in the service of an antiracist and feminist politics that holds that the power relations that dominate others are complicit in the subordination of black and other women of color as well” (xvi). This kind of intellectual maneuver is meant to remove black feminism from all attempts by earlier black feminist critics to situate black feminism on the ground or *standpoint* of black women’s experience. In making it, Smith echoes the work of black feminists such as Ann duCille and Hazel Carby (1987, 10), who argued that “black feminist criticism cannot afford to be essentialist and ahistorical, reducing the experience of all black women to a common denominator and limiting black feminist critics to an exposition of an equivalent black ‘female imagination.’” In response to critics who questioned whether or not this approach to intersectionality disappears black women from view, Smith attempts to hold in tension a desire “to avoid notions of identity that are timeless, transparent, or unproblematic in favor of those that are, in Stuart Hall’s words, ‘never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation’, alongside a need to “acknowledge the strategic need to claim racial, gendered, sexual and class identities as meaningful in specific ways in the name of struggle and resistance to institutional violence and exploitation” (1998, xvii). In this regard her critique anticipates Puar (2007, 216) who argues that “intersectionality and its underpinnings—an unrelenting epistemological will to truth—presupposes identity and thus disavows futurity, or, perhaps more accurately, prematurely anticipates and thus fixes a permanence to forever [whereas] assemblage, in its debt to ontology and its espousal of what cannot be known, seen, or heard, or has yet to be known, seen or heard, allows for becoming beyond or without being.”

Smith runs squarely into the challenge that many of her successors have noted as well—there is a fundamental tension between intersectionality’s theoretical and intellectual possibilities and its use as a tool of institutional transformation. But unlike her successors, Smith’s adoption of intersectionality as a reading strategy is a useful corrective to approaches which attempt to circumscribe the usefulness of intersectionality on the grounds that it cannot epistemologically account for the intersectional identities that it has made visible. Smith (1998, xxiii) reminds us that the primary usefulness of intersectionality, whether as a tool of achieving institutional diversity or as a kind of black feminist reading strategy, is that “by addressing the multifarious ways in which ideologies of race, gender, class, and sexuality reinforce one another, reading intersectionally can illuminate the diverse ways

in which relations of domination and subordination are produced.”

Smith’s ability to wrest intersectionality from the clutches of essentialist ghettoization suggest that battles over the potential essentialism of black feminist perspectives have shaped intersectionality’s traversal through the academy. These debates about the ways that black feminist criticism had the potential to render black female identities static have existed within black feminist criticism at least since 1987, when Hazel Carby suggested that, at best, black feminism should be understood as a “locus of contradictions.” But what Smith reminds us of again is that intersectionality is most useful not as an account of all the intricacies of the subjectivity of any intersectional group, but rather it is useful for exposing the operations of power dynamics in places where a single axis approach might render those operations invisible.

In the fields of sociology and political science, Leslie McCall (2005) and Ange-Marie Hancock (2007), respectively, have also argued for intersectionality as a rubric that can shape social science research protocols. Attempting to remedy the failure of intersectionality researchers to clarify a methodology for intersectionality, McCall argues that in sociology, intersectional research paradigms are indicative of what she terms the *intracategorical* approach. Researchers using this approach “tend to focus on particular social groups at neglected points of intersection ... in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience within such groups.” McCall (2005, 1786) advocates for a move toward an intersectional approach that facilitates “intercategorical complexity,” which “focuses on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories and not on complexities within single social groups, single categories, or both.”

In a follow-up essay about intersectionality as methodology, McCall and Averil Clarke clarify what intersectional methodologies make possible in the field of social science research. In social science, intersectionality facilitates what the authors call “different interpretations of the same facts,” by both incorporating and specifying “the overlap of multiple social dynamics” (Clarke and McCall 2013, 351). “These different interpretations and their normative implications,” they argue, “are the logical outcomes of intersectionality’s beginnings in women of color’s critique of the dominant descriptions of gender and racial inequality, and in their production of new knowledge at the intersection of multiple vectors of scholarship, identity, structure, and social activism” (351). For instance, Clarke (2013, 353) has used the intercategorical approach to challenge traditional sociological understandings of fertility as being tied to class, using the experiences of educated black women to demonstrate that “when it comes to the achievement of low fertility, a race-based deprivation in romance differentiates the experiences of black women with college degrees from similarly educated White and Hispanic women. The advantages of class in desired family formation practices are thus distinctly racialized.” Moreover, “this conclusion, buttressed by detailed analysis of group differences, augments and modifies the conclusions of studies that elevate the role of class-based explanations” (Clarke and McCall, 353).

Hancock (2007) argues that within political science, intersectionality can be useful not solely as a “content specialization” but as a research paradigm. Mapping a similar set of concerns in political science as those outlined by McCall (2005) in sociology, Hancock (2007) notes a shift in political science from single or unitary categorical approaches, to explorations of multiple approaches (i.e., examinations of race and gender) to finally intersectional approaches or the interaction of categories such as race and gender. Within political science, intersectionality as a research paradigm makes at least two important methodological interventions. It “changes the relationship between the categories of investigation from one that is determined a priori to one of empirical investigation,” which could make a difference for instance in “large-n quantitative studies,” which might “assume that race operates identically across entire cities, states, and nations when placed in interaction with gender or class” (2007, 67). Additionally, “intersectionality posits an interactive, mutually constituted relationship among these categories and the way in which race (or ethnicity) and gender (or other relevant categories) play a role in the shaping of political institutions, political actors, the relationships between institutions and actors and the relevant categories themselves” (67).

These paradigmatic approaches open up useful new avenues for thinking about how various social identity categories co-constitute and are constituted by other categories and for asking new kinds of questions in empirical and social-science-based approaches to research. But they also raise concerns about the status of the black female subject relative to these research paradigms. For instance, there is a way in which despite the many adaptations of Western political thought, white men are never disappeared from Western intellectual traditions. Within the history of Western feminism, white women are in no danger of being disappeared as architects of

feminist theory. Yet, the move toward postintersectional frames shows a resurgence of hesitancy to deal with racism. Nikol Alexander-Floyd (2012, 2) situates her skepticism toward these instrumentalist approaches to intersectionality within “two competing currents [that] shape the contemporary moment: a postmodern avoidance of identity and a postfeminist deployment of feminism focused on incorporation and formal equality.” She argues that postmodern approaches to identity, in their insistence that we all “have ruptured identities and fragmented bodies,” “delegitimize the study of racism, sexism, and the structural bases of inequality” (2). Moreover, the convergence of post-feminist and post-racial discourses has created a kind of “post-Black feminist” sensibility that “emphasizes gender and racial representation while short-circuiting more far-reaching social and political change” (2). In this regard, I think that the calls to become postintersectional and to move beyond intersectionality are akin to and give false intellectual heft to broader political suggestions that the election of Barack Obama has thrust us into a post-racial era. These institutional and political moves index an increasing discomfort with talking about racism. Race, removed from an overarching framework of talking about racism, is fine as such conversations merely signal diversity and mark a sense that we are progressing to a time when such categories will become devoid of meaning.

Alexander-Floyd takes both McCall and Hancock to task for using rhetorical strategies that reframe intersectionality in ways that disappear black women from a body of scholarship that emerges from the intellectual production and political activism that they created. According to Alexander-Floyd (2012, 13), McCall’s focus on complexity “advances a post-black feminist politics that disappears black women.” For Alexander-Floyd, the “issue is one of subjugation, not complexity,” but McCall’s categorical approach, “unmoors intersectionality from women of color’s lives and their multifaceted marginalization as its focus” (11). Moreover, Alexander-Floyd demonstrates that McCall, in her rejection of the centrality of narratives to the “intracategorical approach” that defines black feminism, reinstates positivist research frames despite “explicit epistemological challenges that black women, along with feminists in general, have made to the positivist approach” (13). Alexander-Floyd’s critiques sound a note of concern similar to Smith’s, but she concludes that black women should remain at the center of intersectional paradigms.

In tandem with what she terms McCall’s “bait-and-switch” approach to the knowledge production of black women, Alexander-Floyd indicts Hancock for the “universalizing tendency” of her work. Citing Hancock’s argument for intersectionality as a general research paradigm, Alexander-Floyd (2012, 15) notes that “the re-visioning of intersectionality that Hancock presents, however, is designed to give it greater appeal in the discipline in ways that undermine black women and other women of color and intersectionality’s potentially transformative power.” She argues that the universalizing tendency in Hancock’s work constitutes a post-black feminist reading of intersectionality that disappears black women. For instance, one of the key ways that Hancock’s work represents a universalizing tendency is “through its privileging of dominant modes of knowledge production in the discipline. The relegation of intersectionality to a content specialization, as opposed to a research paradigm, voids its standing as a vibrant, complex body of knowledge, implicitly suggesting that its knowledge is naïve or nonempirical” (17). Sirma Bilge (2013, 413) has noted that there is now a troubling move to diminish the import of the racial foundations of intersectionality by coopting its genealogy and declaring the concept to be the “brainchild of feminism” rather than the “brainchild of *black* feminism.” “Such reframing makes intersectionality a property specifically of feminism and women’s/gender studies,” and erases the intellectual labor of its black women creators. Wiegman does not erase this history. Instead, she suggests that the depth of intersectionality’s connections to black feminism saddles it with a kind of baggage—racial baggage—that makes its movement to other spaces problematic. Alexander-Floyd’s point about the ways in which a desire to “universalize” intersectionality disappears black women as a material matter while also curtailing and taming its potential to disrupt problematic relations of power is a powerful one. Thus, she rejects all pretense of universal inclusion and stakes her territory on the ground of black female particularity.

The broader challenges raised by Alexander-Floyd’s critique of intersectionality’s traversal through the social sciences reflect issues about the way in which intersectionality works not just as theory but as praxis. And certainly, we must recognize the manner in which postintersectional moves are deeply tethered to investments in a faulty post-racial idea. The status of racial others within academic spaces remains fragile, especially in the era of the neoliberal university, with its increasing commitments to diversity at the rhetorical level but decreasing commitments at the level of funding for faculty in departments and programs in women’s and gender studies and ethnic studies. To suggest as Puar does that intersectionality is a tool of a neoliberal agenda rather than a tool that

works against it is a line of thinking that should be vigilantly guarded against. Still, questions remain: Does intersectionality need to have a more universal utility in order to retain relevance in the academy? Do we really want to argue that theories about black women should only travel in limited amounts? Is this not an essentializing fiction that limits black women as much as it limits the import of our knowledge production? And if it achieves citational ubiquity but is found not to be broadly applicable, is not intersectionality guilty of the charge of doing violence to other marginalized peoples? These remain challenging questions, but what we must hold front and center is that in its relationship to dominant institutions (be they juridical, academic, or social), intersectionality has a teleological aim to expose and dismantle dominant systems of power, to promote the inclusion of black women and other women of color and to transform the epistemological grounds upon which these institutions conceive of and understand themselves. If it can be found to be doing this work, whether politically, analytically or methodologically, then it should be understood not only as a continued boon to feminist theorizing but also to feminist movement-building. At the same time, intersectionality does not deserve our religious devotion. It has particular goals. To the extent that intersectional frames have made clear a need for new paradigms that more fully explicate the lived realities of women of color, across a range of identity positions, the framework does not preclude the development of new ways of thinking about identity. But as a conceptual and analytic tool for thinking about operations of power, intersectionality remains one of the most useful and expansive paradigms we have.

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