



Reflections on the Mainstreaming of Intersectionality: Critical Engagement and New Visions

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Abstract

Intersectionality has become the reigning paradigm of mainstream feminist discourse. In this paper, I problematize the effects of intersectionality and question whether this discursive shift has achieved its goals of de-centering the experiences of white women and creating a more inclusive movement. Drawing heavily from black radical feminist and women of color critiques, I argue that intersectionality, as it exists now, continues to exclude the narratives and needs of women of color. Building on the essays of Kimberlé Crenshaw and other women of color feminist texts, I attempt to rearticulate intersectionality and create a more expansive vision for feminist political mobilization.

“For Gloria Steinem, the feminist movement is intersectional by default”

-Valentina Zarya “Gloria Steinem: There Is No Such Thing As ‘White Feminism’”

“If Your Feminism Isn’t Intersectional, We Don’t Want It”

-Title of an article by Allyn Haynes for “Her Campus at Georgia State”

Introduction

It is an unfortunate, yet common, occurrence that those who benefit most from structures of power appropriate the language and strategies of resistance for their own selfish purposes. Be it in the contemporary manifestations of LGBTQ+ rights or mainstream feminism, movements for radical change are coopted, obscured, and stripped of their potential to dismantle systems of oppression. Intersectionality is but one of many victims of this bleaching process; a process of washing away radicalism and of appropriation by largely white ideology.

As the quotes above begin to illuminate, intersectionality has received occult-like status in mainstream feminist discourse. That a framework of analysis pushed for by women of color to offer a contrasting vision to white bourgeois feminism is now so commonplace begs certain questions. What changes allowed for intersectionality to be so widely embraced? What failures does intersectionality seem to account for and what failures does it hide? How is intersectionality employed in discourse and in praxis, and, maybe most importantly, is an intersectional approach being employed at all, or is it merely a filler to disguise a continued focus on the issues of privileged women?

This paper seeks to critically engage with the ways in which intersectionality has been accepted, mainstreamed, and fetishized. In doing so, I will argue that, contrary to popular discourses and its intent, intersectionality has not shifted mainstream feminism away from its historical focus on white, privileged women. Though the interconnectedness of race, class, empire, and gender may be payed lip service, truly radical visions for theory and activism are still relegated to the margins. As I will explore in the final part of this paper, the failures of intersectionality to “save” feminism from its historical focus on white, privileged women necessitate new forms of engagement with the framework and feminism more broadly.

Why Examine Intersectionality?

Before entering into a critique of intersectionality and mainstream feminism, it is necessary to contextualize these terms and offer some definitions. Intersectionality was originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the essay “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” in 1989 to describe the simultaneity of oppression felt by women of color. Her work builds on a black feminist tradition which shows that women of color do not merely suffer from race discrimination or gender discrimination, but rather these “multiple oppressions reinforce each other to create new categories of suffering” (Taylor 4). Being a legal scholar, Crenshaw uses court cases such as *DeGraffenreid vs General Motors* which “revealed that General Motors simply did not hire black women prior to 1964 and that all of the black women hired after 1970 lost their jobs in a seniority-based layoff during a subsequent recession” (141). The court

rejected the argument of race discrimination (GM hired black men) and gender discrimination (GM hired white women) in a judgement that “did not contemplate that black women could be discriminated against as ‘Black Women’” (141-142).

Seeing this inability to conceptualize the burdens felt by women of color outside the “single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences” (139), Crenshaw develops her analysis into two types: structural and political. Structural intersectionality looks at cases such as *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* and tries to understand the multiple forms of oppression operating in the lives of women of color. In her speech to The Omega Women’s Center, Crenshaw explains political intersectionality as “the failure of movements, of interventions, of strategies of reform to deal with those marginalized cases of racism or sexism because they don’t look familiar. It doesn’t look like anything people realize. So, it is political intersectionality, women being marginalized by the very movements that claim them” (Crenshaw “Structural” 00:03:57-00:04:20). In face of the erasure of the narratives of women of color in social justice movements, structural and political intersectionality attempt to de-marginalize the experiences of women of color and instead make them central to movements for liberation. The experiences of women of color are not distractions from anti-racist or anti-sexist interventions, but rather, as the Combahee River Collective thematized, “if you could free the most oppressed people in society, then you would have to free everyone” (Taylor 5).

This paper examines mainstream feminism’s inability to reckon with the political transformations necessary to make a movement “intersectional.” Of course, the term “mainstream feminism” is problematic in itself, as the category is often tossed around with no meaning attached to it. In discussing a mainstream feminism, I am not implying there is only one kind of feminism, but rather that some movements gain dominance in the public sphere based on their conformation to certain liberal standards which are easily digestible by prominent media outlets.

If we look at the rapid popularity of the #MeToo movement, we can see how certain feminist issues become mainstream—which is to say, widely known—while others continue to be sidelined. Started over a decade ago by Tarana Burke, the “me too” movement, according to its website, aims to “address both the dearth in resources for survivors of sexual violence and to build a community of advocates, driven by survivors, who will be at the forefront of creating solutions to interrupt sexual violence in communities” (“History and Vision”). In response to the Harvey Weinstein allegations in 2017, Alyssa Milano tweeted the #MeToo to begin a broader dialogue on sexual violence. As CNN reported on Facebook, “in less than 24 hours, 4.7 million people around the world have engaged in the ‘Me too’ conversation, with more than 12 million posts, comments, and reactions” (Santiago and Criss). Indeed, the #MeToo exploded as millions of women shared their stories, offering a sober reckoning with a phenomenon that is often stigmatized in this country. For many victims, it was the first time they were able to discuss their trauma publicly; as the number of testimonials increased, the

sense of solidarity grew stronger.

Turning this incredible energy into a robust movement to end sexual violence has still proved difficult. In one interview for *New York* magazine one year after the viral moment, Tarana Burke discusses the failure of mainstream coverage of ‘me too’ to center the needs of victims. As she states, “there has been so much talk and focus on individual perpetrators and salacious stories and those kind of things and very little conversation about the people who actually said me too” (“Tarana Burke” 00:01:40-00:01:55). In her TED Talk, Burke again discusses the imbalance in reporting, noting how “So much about what we hear about the Me Too Movement is about individual bad actors, or depraved, isolated behavior, and it fails to recognize that anybody in a position of power comes with privilege, and it renders those without that power more vulnerable” (Burke 00:09:57-00:11:51). Burke is gesturing towards a politics of care which centers the needs and stories of victims to create a movement that takes on the root causes of sexual violence—acting on the ethos that “trauma halts possibility. Movement activates it” (Burke 00:09:21-00:09:29)—the mainstream conversations and coverage of “me too” fail to capture the larger vision of the movement. Focusing more on scandalous cases of powerful men being forced to answer for their actions than the larger social context which gave them the opportunity to cause harm, the mainstream discussions on “me too” conform to a narrative of individual responsibility and punishment which erases conversations on the more fundamental changes needed to end sexual violence.

In discussing which feminisms gain the most attention, it is also important to discuss the influence of white bourgeois ideology. To label and critique white bourgeois feminism is not the same as implying that all white women in feminist movements are of the same class background. This also does not exclude white women from emerging feminist movements or argue that white women have always hurt or forgotten those most marginalized in our society. Indeed, the solidarity of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA—which is led by a white woman and represents an industry which is more than 70% women and more than 70% white—was pivotal in ending Trump’s shutdown and is poised to play a key role should another shutdown occur (DATA USA). Working class white women are not the same as the bourgeois feminists I critique in this paper; as shown by the history of their activism, the consciousness of white working-class women is different from their class privileged counterparts.

White bourgeois feminism is the feminism of women who have both race and class privilege but are still discriminated against because of their gender. In one speech, Angela Davis also refers to this ideology as “glass ceiling feminism” which, as she states, “is grounded from the very outset in hierarchies...those who are already high enough to reach the ceiling...all they have to do is push through” (Davis “Revolution Today” 00:49:10-00:50:00). This is the feminism of figures such as Hilary Clinton, who capitalized on her declaration “women’s rights are human rights” without considering the harm she did to women by helping expand

the prison-industrial complex, voting for the war in Iraq, and the intervention in Libya. She refused to recognize how women being killed by the police, being bombed by drones, or starving to death because of global capitalist exploitation might see imperialism, racism, and classism as central to feminist struggles. White bourgeois feminism is often more mainstream because it does not radically alter the structure of the state or the balance of power. Though the analogy of the glass ceiling may be valid for white women, as Ayanna Pressley, the Representative for the 7th District of Massachusetts, stated in her victory speech, “when it comes to women of color candidates, folks don’t just talk about a glass ceiling. What they describe is a concrete one. But you know what breaks through concrete? Seismic shifts” (00:05:00-00:05:20).

Historically, white bourgeois feminists have silenced and further marginalized women of color in their organizing. In *Women, Race, and Class*, Davis details how the women’s suffrage movement turned from ignoring the needs of women of color because it was not the right “time” to outright racism used to court white southern women (Davis “Racism in the Women’s Suffrage Movement”). In discussions around choice and bodily autonomy, the forced sterilization of indigenous, black, and poor women is almost never talked about (Davis “Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights”). In her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Lila Abu-Lughod details how white bourgeois feminists proclaim the need to “save” Muslim women from their oppressive religion while ignoring the histories of imperialism which created the social conditions we see today (Abu-Lughod). It is the limited scope of white bourgeois feminism that makes intersectionality and the work of women of color necessary. In discussions of “third wave” feminism, intersectionality is supposedly the bedrock which allows for the inclusion of all women. This absorption of intersectionality by mainstream feminism has not shifted the focus away from white bourgeois feminist issues. Instead, this limited interpretation of intersectionality continues to ignore the needs of women of color and those most marginalized in our society.

The Problem with Identity and the Individual

The world we live in is almost unimaginably different from that of twenty, thirty, or forty years ago. Innovations in technology have enabled processes of globalization that have drastically changed the structuring of society and our relationships to each other. In just mere seconds, we can access an almost limitless quantity of information, communicate with people near and far, and market ourselves in ways which were previously inconceivable. Now is the age of buzzwords, of quick, discernible, and easily reproducible sound bites facilitated by a media apparatus that operates on simplistic and “efficient” packaging of information. These are the conditions in which mainstream feminism must exist and operate.

Out of the “rise of digital platforms; a dynamic blogosphere, active discussion boards, early adoption of Twitter, and extensive use of Tumblr,” a

“popfeminism” has emerged (Baer 22). This popfeminism uses social media as a tool “to create a widespread public discussion of feminism” (22). On Instagram, for instance, the “#feminism” has been used 6,735,788 times, “#intersectionalfeminism” has been used 378,509 times, and “#intersectionality” has been used 115,024 (Instagram). In general, social media encourages a “commodified self-representation” (Baer 24) in which the individual is constantly fashioning their image in whatever mode seems most relevant. In the charged political climate in which we live, intersectionality, feminism, and, especially, intersectional feminism have become staples in a public discourse that attempts to use social justice as a means of accruing cultural and symbolic capital. The idea of cultural and symbolic capital, as I apply it here, originates from Pierre Bourdieu. As he writes in “Social Capital and Social Classes,”

Any scientific enterprise of classification must take into account the fact that social agents appear as objectively characterized by two different orders of properties: on the one hand, by material properties which, starting with the body, can be numbered and measured like any other object of the physical world; and, on the other hand, by symbolic properties which are affixed upon them through a relationship with subjects capable of perceiving and evaluating them and which demand to be grasped according to their specific logic. (293)

This is all to say that there exists both material forms of capital money and property and symbolic forms of capital, such as one’s level of education and cultural fluency. These differing forms of capital, and what capital one is *perceived* to have, govern how they are hierarchized in society. Symbolic capital is always in flux, always responding to the current trends in society. In this age of social justice, when white moderates have once again been called out for their complacency, feminism and intersectionality become modalities for showing one’s commitment, at least superficially, to the project of social change.

Through the performative platform of social media, individuals present the best versions of themselves to solidify their position in social hierarchies. While radical organizing has originated through social media, #BlackLivesMatter being a perfect example, such potential is not realized through mainstream feminist usage of these platforms. The spread of feminist terminology through social media has naturalized this language in the discourse, but the terms, rather than the meaning behind them, become the focal point. As two women of color observe in the article “Intersectionality? Not While Feminists Participate in Pile-Ons,”

Unmoored from structural analysis, intersectional feminism is fast becoming a shallow buzzword that elevates the individual, stifles dissent, and, most worrying, is being weaponized to silence women of color. (Hamad and Liddle)

Though intersectionality has been made more “accessible” by “hashtag,”

popfeminism, this mainstreaming de-historizes intersectionality and erases the needs of women of color. In addition to a loss of structural analysis, the failure to discuss women of color when presenting intersectionality reproduces the very conditions which made intersectionality a necessary intervention. Mainstream feminists focus on individual actors and intentionality fails to account for the structural and historical context that continues to oppress women of color. In discussing what she labels “intersectional erasure,” Crenshaw states, “sometimes we fail to see the specific contours of women’s contexts because they just don’t fit our prototypical vision. Where the prototype doesn’t fit, the issue doesn’t get included” (Crenshaw “Intersectional Erasure” 00:03:25-00:03:45). A fetishism of the term “intersectionality” that forgets the legacies of women of color feminisms and refuses to expand the scope of feminist mobilization creates the illusion of change without putting in the necessary work to center women of color and other minorities at the margins of society. Focusing on individual credentials and the performative employment of intersectionality, mainstream feminists create new forms of exclusion that limit the voices of those most marginalized in our society.

In “If Your Feminism Isn’t Intersectional, We Don’t Want It,” referenced at the beginning of this paper, the author offers those not yet “saved” by the light of intersectionality a chance for redemption by stating, “If you’re reading this and realizing the error of your ways, don’t worry. There’s still hope for you” (Haynes). She goes on to write “Intersectionality is *just* recognition that feminism has multiple levels” (emphasis my own) (Haynes). Following this logic, intersectionality becomes a simple change that any well-meaning person can enact to absolve herself of the legacy of white feminism. If white bourgeois feminists appear to perform ally-ship and appropriate the language of intersectionality, they can accumulate a symbolic capital which solidifies their position as “woke” and absolved of past (current) failures. Though little work is actually done to shift the ideology of mainstream feminism, the symbolic perception of change makes individuals feel as if they are performing a “better” feminism than before.

Contrary to the discourse of inclusion, when we examine intersectionality as a means of accruing symbolic capital, we can see how it produces new hierarchies and methods of exclusion. This process of stratification is facilitated by the trend in mainstream feminism to reduce terms to static identity categories. bell hooks describes how “assuming a ‘feminist’ identity...undermines [the] feminist movement” because it “project[s] the assumption that ‘feminist’ is but another pre-packaged role women can now select as they search for identity” (29). This ability to choose when to be a feminist “reflects the class nature of the movement” (hooks 29). When intersectionality becomes an identity, a stable state of being, it often elides the work that needs to be done to employ a truly intersectional approach. For white bourgeois women, the convergence and accumulation of the burdens of race, class, empire, and patriarchy is not self-evident. This reality was made clear during the heyday of second wave feminism when white feminists paid attention only to patriarchy as they understood it. Instead of being an identity that mainstream feminists can assume, intersectionality is most productive when

used as a frame of analysis that brings already lived experiences and marginalized narratives to the center of political movements. Employed in this manner, intersectionality is not a moment of revelation, but rather a continuous process of educating, listening, and adjusting.

A more current example of mainstream appropriation of black culture and thought is evident in the popularization and use of the term “woke.” Though the phrase “stay woke” has a long history in the African American vernacular, garnering more mainstream attention with its juxtaposition to #BlackLivesMatter, the idea of being “woke” has been absorbed in popular culture in the past several years (Pulliam-Moore). Though the difference between “I am woke” and “stay woke” may seem negligible, it is reflective of the same trend of turning calls for engagement into static identities. “Stay woke” invites a constant process of education and disillusionment that seeks to continuously challenge how knowledge production in our society erases the narratives of the oppressed. “I am woke” or other identity configurations connote a static position that one can achieve, creating a sense of permanence.

Identity configurations of feminism, intersectionality, and “woke-ness” make these terms more easily discernible forms of symbolic capital. Since these terms seem to be stable units which one can become or be in the act of becoming, they are commodified forms of symbolic capital that are accumulated to solidify one’s status, without making meaningful changes to one’s political engagement. Using intersectionality in this way ensures that a “real” (or more effective), intersectional approach to mainstream feminism is not achieved. To go even further, when intersectionality becomes a tool of forming and maintaining hierarchies, mainstream feminism continues to be bleached with ideological whiteness, marginalizing women of color despite their limited “inclusion.”

Hamad and Little take notice of this (2017). We see this when white feminists say that intersectionality must be “severed from black women’s lives and bodies, which are overdetermined by their racialized gender as specific and are only contingently the object of intersectional analysis” (Carastathis 20). Though intersectionality “originates in social-movement discourses that identified the manifold manifestations of oppression, discrimination, and violence that structure the conditions in which women of color live” (Carastathis 16), its mainstreaming has made intersectionality a tool to further privilege white women while continuing to ignore women of color.

As bell hooks details, the “emphasis on identity and lifestyle is appealing because it creates a false sense that one is engaged in praxis” (30). By appropriating the language of intersectionality, mainstream feminists reinforce this “false sense” of praxis. By “identifying” as intersectional feminists, and thus absolved of past (current) exclusions of women of color, mainstream feminists then act as the authority on inclusive movement building. In judging others based on their perceived understanding of intersectionality, these feminists may think that they have shifted their movement, but this focus on ideological purity

is not reflected in praxis. A wide-ranging political engagement, which stands with women of color and those most marginalized, is still missing. bell hooks continues by stating, “praxis within any political movement that aims to have a radical transformative impact on society cannot be solely focused on creating spaces wherein would-be radicals experience safety and support...Focusing on feminism as political commitment, we resist the emphasis on individual identity and lifestyle” (hooks 30). It is not just individual white, bourgeois feminists that must change. Rather, we must move beyond the search for purity and engage in the oftentimes messy process of building coalitions that do the work of solidarity with those most oppressed in our society.

Beyond Statements: A Habit of Limited Political Engagement

In the age of Trump, mobilization of white women has exploded, most notably during the Women’s Marches held in protest to the current administration. These spectacles would like to assert themselves as intersectional and not centered on white women. The mission statement for the Women’s March reads as follows:

The mission of Women’s March is to harness the political power of diverse women and their communities to create transformative social change. Women’s March is a women-led movement providing intersectional education on a diverse range of issues and creating entry points for new grassroots activists & organizers to engage in their local communities through trainings, outreach programs and events. Women’s March is committed to dismantling systems of oppression through nonviolent resistance and building inclusive structures guided by self-determination, dignity and respect. (Women’s March 2018)

Upon examining the platform of the Women’s March, it is clear that, in theory, the organizers attempted to employ an intersectional approach, but theory and words mean nothing if they are not followed up with actions. Theory must be accompanied with praxis to have productive potential, but it has often been the case that the feminists who came out in support of this march did not expand the scope of their activism. Brittany Oliver, a woman of color activist commenting on the march, asks, “Are women who are showing up to protest Donald Trump going to show up at a Black Lives Matter rally? Are these same women going to show up, you know, to end police brutality? Will they show up for rallies against deportation of immigrants in our country?” (“Women of Color” 00:03:24-00:03:44).

To answer her questions, the events surrounding the March for Our Lives show that it is often the case that white privileged bodies take precedence over black lives. Just days before the march, Stephon Clark, an “unarmed 22-year-old black man...was killed by police in his grandmother’s Sacramento backyard” (Bates 2018). Demonstrations took place for several days, one “caused a lengthy

delay in a scheduled game and prevented fans from entering the arena” (Bates 2018). Unsurprisingly, the composition of the protests were largely people of color, who do not have the privilege to sit back and stay silent. Several days later, the March for Our Lives, by some reports, “reached about 800,000 people” (Reilly 2018) and received, as is typical, a large share of the media coverage (Zurawik 2018). One Parkland survivor Jaclyn Corin, responding to the imbalance of coverage based on race and class privilege, stated, “We recognize that Parkland received more attention because of its affluence... But we share this stage today and forever with those communities who have always stared down the barrel of a gun” (Shabad, Bailey, McCausland). Though the organizers attempted to be more inclusive in their discussion of gun violence, beyond the symbolic inclusion of black and brown bodies, the political commitment to these issues has not come. The March for Our Lives follows the unfortunate trend that school shootings, especially in majority white areas (Parkland, according to US census data, is 83.7% white), are met with outrage and explosive mobilization, while the abuses of the police continue to be met with silence by those privileged in society.

I want to be careful in making this critique, for it is not my intention to suggest that school shootings are not an issue, and I do not want to invalidate the trauma that those students endured, but the double standard in political mobilization is striking. In her work on the afterlives of slavery, Christina Sharpe discusses “an awful arithmetic, a violence of abstraction” (100) which accepts the death of black bodies as a regrettable, but inescapable, reality. Indeed, “The ground of compromise, the firmament, the access to freedom and democracy” is “littered with black bodies” (100). Sharpe recognizes this abandonment of black lives, and especially black children in the speeches of President Obama. After the Sandy Hook shooting, Obama passionately stated, “*If there is even one step we can take to save another child...surely we have an obligation to try*” (Sharpe 95). When addressing black death in Chicago the urgency is lost as his rhetoric changes to “*We may not be able to save every child from gun violence, but if we save a few, that starts changing the atmospheres in our communities*” (Sharpe 96). There is a “violent arithmetic” at play which cannot afford the loss of black lives and cannot give the death of black children the same political outrage as the death of white children (Sharpe 96). These same dynamics continue to haunt the ongoing debate around gun safety; while the death of white children is rightfully met with outrage, the lives of black children are marked by a “racial calculus” which makes their deaths more acceptable in the national conscience.

I reference the March for Our Lives and discussions around #BlackLivesMatter in the context of feminism because women of color are deeply affected by gun violence (Crenshaw’s recent activism in #SayHerName attempts to make discussions around black women killed by the police more central) and because the “racial calculus” which cannot afford black children the same political commitment as white children extends to other movements as well. Indeed, in

that “awful arithmetic” which renders black life expendable, mainstream feminist movements leave behind women of color in their politics. Intersectionality, as the guiding framework of mainstream feminist organizing, is supposed to push the needs of those most oppressed to the center of our political agenda. Though discourses and platforms may seem more diverse, the political engagement that emerges succumbs to the “awful arithmetic” which diminishes the urgency of defending women of color.

No single protest can do everything; that is not the goal. What is desperately needed is an active and wide-ranging political engagement that goes beyond greater “inclusion” in an organization’s platform. Feminists who talk of intersectionality need to prove it in their praxis. They must support efforts to end police brutality, they must attend rallies supporting immigrants, and they must stop encouraging U.S. imperialism. Those who wish to engage in intersectional feminism must have an intersectional praxis, not an intersectional identity. If such mobilization seems too difficult for the present, mainstream feminists and social justice movements could at least stop advocating for policy reforms that hurt poor people and people of color. In the platform for the March for Our Lives, to provide one example, the organizers want to “eliminate absurd restrictions on ATF” and “limit high-powered weapons to the military” (“How We Save Lives”). This list of demands completely ignores the role of U.S. imperialism, the military-industrial complex, and the institution of the police in oppressing marginalized people in this country. Such a platform may make strides in ending the death of largely white bodies by school shootings, but also strengthens the police state which has already taken 370 lives this year alone (“Fatal Force”).

In her response to criticism of the first Women’s March, Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor wrote a piece titled “Think the Women’s March wasn’t radical enough? Do something about it.” In the piece, she criticizes the “arrogant and moralistic chastising of anyone who is not as ‘woke,’” which she argues is a “sign of political immaturity that continues to stunt the growth of the American left” (Taylor “How We Get Free”). In her article, Taylor confronts the issue of mass mobilization and the creation of durable, effective political movements. As “mass movements aren’t homogeneous—they are, pretty much by definition, heterogenous,” it is necessary for more radical comrades to “do a better job at facilitating debate, discussion, and argument so that we talk about how to build the kind of movement we want” (“How We Get Free”).

I agree with Taylor that a mass movement which includes those previously disengaged from politics is necessary to challenge Trump and the underlying conditions which led to his election. The first Women’s March proved itself to be an incredible moment of resistance, with millions of women showing up to express their anger and discontent with the new administration, but turning that energy into movement has been more difficult. Though many participants may now mark their calendars for the Women’s March each year, the ongoing political engagement so necessary to our struggles has not come. Beyond platforms, we

must affirm our commitment to intersectionality by actually changing our politics, by standing with those most marginalized, not just on a stage one day a year, but in times when solidarity is needed. Yes, we need to encourage those new to politics and give space to learn, grow, and debate, but if we do not demand a certain level of engagement, then those who are most marginalized will continue to carry the heaviest burden. If we wish to seriously consider the implications of political intersectionality, we must re-imagine ways of coalition-building so that feminist mobilization becomes less about the appearance of inclusion, and more focused on the material realities of those most oppressed in this society.

Will Voting Save Us?

Beyond the physical marches, which illustrate the dissonance between mainstream feminist discourse and praxis, the political agenda that organizers sought to push forward once again shows their limited approach to intersectional movement building. The organizers of the Women’s March, for instance, took a “powerful movement that has ignited thousands of activists and new leaders” and concentrated that spirit in their “Power to the Polls” campaign (*Women’s March: Power to the Polls*). This idea that altering the composition of the political elite can create meaningful change is not uncommon and reflects mainstream feminism’s misunderstanding of intersectionality. When intersectionality is reduced to differences in identity, then diversity and inclusion become the primary goal of “intersectional” movements. An “intersectionality,” influenced by social media, which uses facets of one’s identity as mere tokens to be collected and fetishized sees representation, or lack thereof, as the primary culprit of society’s ills.

This interpretation of intersectionality is rooted in the neoliberal fixation with the individual and deflects attention away from the systemic causes of oppression. The idea that representation alone will do the work of dismantling systems of oppression assumes that institutions are not the problem, but rather their members. If the media, the work force, and the government could just be more diverse, then all of our problems would go away. This line of thinking ignores the fact that the institutions we live in were built to maintain hierarchies and are imbued with the ideologies of racism, sexism, classism, and imperialism.

Angela Davis, in *Freedom Is A Constant Struggle*, uses the example of South Africa to problematize the assumption that greater inclusion will lead to more just practices. In one interview, she states:

Well, what’s also interesting in South Africa is the fact that many of the positions of leadership from which black people were of course totally excluded during apartheid are now occupied by black people, including within the police hierarchy. I recently saw a film on the Marikana miners, who were attacked, injured, and many killed by the police. The miners were black, the police force was black, the provincial head of the police force was a black woman. The national head of the police force is a black woman. Nevertheless, what happened in Marikana was,

in important respects, a reenactment of Sharpeville. Racism is so dangerous because it does not necessarily depend on the individual actors, but rather is deeply embedded in the apparatus. (17-18)

What Davis makes clear in this quote is that when the “technology, the regimes, the targets are still the same” (*Freedom* 18), the institution will reproduce oppression regardless of who is in charge. Individuals may create small reforms, but no one person can fix an institution that is fundamentally unjust. This reality is nothing new for those engaged in a radical intersectional theory/praxis. Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her essay “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” writes, “The more promising political imperative is to challenge the legitimacy of such power expectations by exposing their dysfunctional and debilitating effect on families and communities of color” (1258). An intersectional approach recognizes that structures of power converge to create different forms of oppression. It does not rely on defunct institutions for liberation, but rather challenges the way power operates and seeks to reimagine, not just diversify, the structure of society.

When institutions are crafted to not only exploit people on the basis of race, class, gender, sexuality, or national origin, but also to reproduce these power dynamics, then filling an oppressive institution with more “diverse” faces will not bring the changes necessary for those most marginalized in our society. Indeed, as Audre Lorde teaches us, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (12). Mainstream feminist focus on filling these institutions with more colorful, diverse faces may create piece-meal reform, but overall it only diminishes the urgency for truly radical reimagining of society. As Davis writes, “Neoliberal ideology drives us to focus on individuals, ourselves, individual victims, individual perpetrators,” but one person alone cannot “bear the burden of history” (*Freedom* 137). An intersectional praxis, an intersectional movement, must move beyond such short-sighted goals and truly engage in the project of radical transformation.

In her first book, *From #BlackLivesMatter To Black Liberation*, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor discusses the failure of what she calls “black faces in high places” (75). As she states, “the pursuit of black electoral power became one of the principal strategies that emerged from the black Power era” (80), but “the daily tinkering with fiscal constraints and municipal minutiae was certainly time-consuming and distracted from the bigger picture of total social transformation” (Taylor 88). Instead of the broad commitment to anti-racist legislation and economic justice so needed in communities of color, the black electoral class hid behind reifying and dangerous stereotypes for its own personal gain (Taylor 106). We see this most clearly when discussing the legacy of President Obama, who built a strong multi-racial coalition to win his election, then left behind his constituency on urgent issues of police brutality, deportation, and economic

security. As Angela Davis writes, “By this time everybody who may be hoping that Obama was the messiah realized that he was simply the president of the United States of America. Simply the president of the racist, imperialist United States of America” (*Freedom* 123). The focus on black electoral representation teaches us that when we work in “political realities,” the transformations so desperately needed do not come. Instead, the aesthetics of diversity justify further marginalization of those most oppressed in our society.

In her article published days before the Women’s March of 2019 entitled “Turning the Women’s March Into a Mass Movement Was Never Going to Be Simple,” Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor refutes the idea that the platform of the Women’s March is too broad to be feasible. As she writes, “While some critics argue that this model involves taking on too many issues, this betrays an old and stagnant view that helped to marginalize black and Latina women from feminism in an earlier age” (“Turning the Women’s March”). Though I have already argued that a broad platform must be met with an engaged praxis, Taylor is right to argue that “If we don’t confront and include these abuses, we risk having a ‘women’s march’ that simply becomes an abstraction in the lives of poor and working-class women of color” (“Turning the Women’s March”).

In light of the tensions between Women’s March, Inc. and March On, an organization whose sole strategy is gaining electoral power, Taylor critiques the general culture of both organizations and the “absence of genuine, democratic debate and argument necessary to ultimately determine a direction for the movement” (“Turning the Women’s March”). Taylor is making an essential point here that resonates with the failures of electoral politics. Though movements are needed to elect someone to office, once in power elected officials face a myriad of pressures that weaken their dedication to constituents. Holding these officials accountable can be difficult and often the will of the majority is not reflected by the decision of lawmakers. As both Women’s March, Inc. and March On are “nonprofit organizations that rely on funding to pay staffs and organizers, thereby professionalizing their participation” and value “expertise” over broad engagement, the structure of both organizations discourages the broad-based coalition necessary in resisting the current administration (“Turning the Women’s March”).

These organizations reproduce the exclusionary decision-making process embodied in electoral politics by treating the public as “passive” and “awaiting marching orders” (“Turning the Women’s March”). The logic of ceding power to more “capable” individuals reproduces the power imbalances that lead to marginalization. Though Taylor teaches us that “black people’s progress has always been by the strength of the movements of the mass of ordinary black people” (*From #BlackLivesMatter* 106), the focus of Women’s March, Inc. and March On in making activism a “profession” limits opportunity for ordinary people to engage in feminist politics. Individuals alone can never do the work of radically transforming society. Instead of an intersectionality focused on

elections and diversity, we might move toward a political intersectionality that abandons those tactics which produce hierarchies and diminish the agency of the masses. Of course, in the current political field in which we live, voting is a necessary tool to create change, but by making the forms of exclusion inherent in electoral politics the guiding strategy for feminist organizing, organizations lose the capacity to create a true movement for resistance and change. Mainstream feminist organizations discourage an intersectional political engagement by organizing around individuals, professionals, and “experts” rather than doing the work of building broad coalitions and initiating a mass movement of people. Beyond the logics of the “elected” and the “professional,” we might envision a feminist politician that utilizes the power of the masses to transform not just individual policies, but the entire decision-making process.

Towards A More Expansive Feminist Political Engagement

And now when I see her searching the garbage—for what? The thing we assassinated? I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn’t matter. It’s too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it’s much, much, much too late.

Toni Morrison—*The Bluest Eye*

We live in an imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. Such a reality is brought to the surface when those disciplined, abused, and killed by the police have the courage to declare that Black Lives Matter. The nightmare never seems to end for the victims of the so called “War on Terrorism,” which has been used as a blanket excuse to increase U.S. military presence, while also expanding the capacity of domestic police forces to enact violence on black and brown communities. The threat of elimination is ever present for Native peoples, whose reproduction, sexuality, and culture have been the target of state sponsored annihilation campaigns. The pain is felt most intimately when sexual violence continues with little to no consequence. This country, this world, this existence is shaped, maintained, and haunted by systems of oppression.

When one looks at the convergences, the intersections, of these systems of power, the effects are even more profound. Trans-women of color, for instance, are not only abused and killed by the police in despicably high numbers, but their stories are erased because they are “generally seen as less feminine and vulnerable” (*From #BlackLivesMatter* 164) and thus less worthy of life. The power which gives rise to such devastating realities does not operate on a single axis. Instead,

as Foucault describes, “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques” are employed “for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (140). Such techniques of domination compound, interlock, and, indeed, intersect to create unique and increasingly burdensome forms of oppression.

The first part of this paper examined the ways in which intersectionality as a term, framework, and discourse has been appropriated by mainstream feminist discourses, erasing its radical potential. It is not my intent, though, to present intersectionality as a vestige of the past needing to be scrapped entirely. Such efforts diminish the work that intersectionality has done, and continues to do, in radical, non-white bourgeois feminism.

As described above, the task before us in dismantling imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is immense. An intersectional framework alone will not rid us of “the systems of domination” (hooks 32) so pervasive in society. Those who see intersectionality as the savior of feminism hopelessly reduce the framework to the single-axis forms of thinking that intersectionality seeks to circumvent. bell hooks puts it best in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* when she states: “Just as our lives are not fixed or static but always changing, our theory must remain fluid, open, responsive to new information” (xiii). For intersectionality to be productive, it should not be expected to solve everything. Rather, intersectionality should exist with a multitude of theories and practices, each making their own contributions and responding to the dynamic circumstances in which we live.

In addition to developing theory, those invested in the project of liberation must pay equal, if not more attention, to praxis and to the building of tangible movements. Contemporary critics of academia, in general, and feminist theory, in particular, believe there is a disproportionate focus on what is wrong with social movements and little to no attention paid to developing alternative solutions. Such an argument, though often exaggerated, is not without some validity. Though I am not currently, and will never be, in a position to “fix” feminist movements, this section of the paper will attempt to offer new possibilities for feminist theory and praxis. Instead of trying to construct a genealogy of intersectionality, which several authors have already undertaken (read Jenifer Nash’s “Intersectionality and Its Discontents”), my analysis seeks to synthesize a variety of sources from the realms of theory and activism to offer new insights. Through such an endeavor, I hope to show how theory and praxis are mutually constitutive forces both engaged in struggles for liberation. What is most urgently needed, I will argue, is a re-centering of the systemic, a re-articulation of intersectionality that goes past the foundational essays of Crenshaw, and a modality for maintaining the radical focus and potential of feminist theory, be it through intersectionality or other frameworks.

As explained in the first part of the paper, the language of intersectionality originates in two germinal works by Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989) and “Mapping the

Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” (1991). Being a legal scholar, Crenshaw’s analysis focuses on easily identifiable instances of compounded oppression caused by the intersection of race and gender. As she writes in her first essay,

single-axis framework[s] erase 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. In other words, in race discrimination cases, discrimination tends to be viewed in terms of sex- or class-privileged blacks; in sex discrimination cases, the focus is on race- and class-privileged women (“Demarginalizing” 140).

Her essays do important work in identifying the erasure of women of color in mainstream discourses and in showing the limitations of single-axis frameworks. In a stark contrast to contemporary appropriations of intersectionality, Crenshaw in her speech at the “Women of the World Festival 2016” (WOW) states explicitly:

Intersectionality is not primarily about identity, it’s about how structures make certain identities the consequence of and the vehicle for vulnerability. So, if you want to know how many intersections matter, you need to look at the context (“On Intersectionality” 6:55-7:27).

From its inception, intersectionality has always been focused on structures, on how the distribution of power discriminates against women of color. One may face compounded discrimination because of the intersection of one’s identities, but the systems of power, not the identities, are the vehicle driving that discrimination. This is key, for a productive intersectional approach must always examine the whole institution which gives rise to oppression, not just the intersections of identity within one person. An intersectional analysis is not about counting intersections as an academic exercise but seeks to show how the intersection of certain identities causes specific forms of discrimination in the lives of women of color. In identifying the problem, we can then organize to stop instances of discrimination which would otherwise be overlooked.

The language of discrimination is also central to the concept of intersectionality as Crenshaw posits it. Discrimination, especially in legal contexts, focuses on easily discernible and substantive instances of mistreatment which can be used as evidence in legal proceedings. Intersectionality in these contexts becomes a valuable tool in building cases for reform, but the language of discrimination is insufficient in relating the ways oppression operates in everyday life. I have used the word radical and radical intersectional approach several times throughout this paper. Radical, in line with the black feminist tradition, refers to the focus on the root issues of oppression and often views dismantling of those systems as the means of achieving liberation. Intersectionality in Crenshaw’s

work looks at how institutions treat women of color differently and seeks to correct such instances of discrimination. The solution to discrimination is reform, which is necessary in alleviating the burden of women of color but cannot itself bring an end to systems of oppression.

Since intersectionality is primarily occupied with the effects of structural power as they manifest themselves in discrimination, we need a broader framework that looks critically at the ways power operates. In attempting to conceptualize the modalities on which power relies, Patricia Hill Collins finds the matrix of domination to be a more productive framework. As she writes:

Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppression, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice. In contrast, the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized. Regardless of the particular intersections involved, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power reappear across quite different forms of oppression (18).

Collins' use of both intersectionality and matrix of domination reminds us that no one term is sufficient in understanding the exercise and effects of power. New and juxtaposing frameworks do not detract from intersectionality, but rather give a broader understanding of how power operates to create different forms of oppression. As an identity-obsessed intersectionality now dominates mainstream discourses, we must find ways of maintaining the radical potential of intersectionality and feminism more broadly. Several frameworks and ways of understanding how power is connected exist. These include interlocking and compounding oppression, as well as the idea of convergence. A more varied lexicon for describing how power functions may help maintain focus on systemic forces and may offer a more nuanced discussion of oppression.

Such an approach is only useful if the specificity of each term and their individual histories are understood. If these frameworks of conceptualizing power turn into interchangeable buzzwords, then their addition has no meaning. Terms and theories must also be engaged in praxis and offer guidance for radical organizing. Those who create, engage with, and share theory should take the extra step to explain how theories fit into the broader movement. What is the theory, what does it add, what actions does it accompany, and what does the theory not include? Theory and praxis have become distant in mainstream discourses, even though both are vitally important to building revolutionary movements. If we change our habits and always present theory with its practical or "material" implications, this may help re-solidify the interconnectedness of theory/praxis.

In *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* (2016), Angela Davis expands the scope of intersectionality to put liberation struggles in a broader context. For her, an intersectional approach recognizes the connection between individual

events, especially when they are the product of similar structures and intersecting oppressions. She writes:

I think that we constantly have to make connections. So that when we are engaged in the struggle against racist violence, in relation to Ferguson, Michael Brown, and New York, Eric Gardner, we can't forget the connections with Palestine. So in many ways I think we have to engage in an exercise of intersectionality. Of always foregrounding those connections so that people remember that nothing happens in isolation. That when we see the police repressing protests in Ferguson we also have to think about Israeli police and the Israeli army repressing protests in occupied Palestine. (45)

Davis attempts to push intersectionality away from the focus on individual people and even individual movements, instead calling attention to how power globally intersects to produce oppression. This pushes for a broader understanding of systemic oppression, drawing our analysis away from the confines of the nation-state and putting the structure of power into a global context. In practice, international solidarity movements are needed to enact a radical transformation of society. That police brutality, for instance, arises in a myriad of contexts shows that there is something in the entire global system which gives rise to oppression. Dismantling imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is not a task that the United States can do alone. Rather, we must go beyond the U.S. and begin to reimagine the entire world system.

Though I have spent the majority of this essay deconstructing “intersectional” identity and the individual, identity politics can be a starting off point for critically important conversations. The Combahee River Collective, a group of black radical feminists in the seventies, discuss the “personal genesis for black feminism, that is, the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual black women’s lives” (Combahee 272). They “believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression” (273-274). This is a bold statement, but one which has great potential, for the intersections of their identities made it so “the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy” (274) would be the only way to be truly liberated. Unlike the limited scope of white bourgeois feminists, the members of the Combahee River Collective knew that their liberation was bound up in the struggle to end all forms of oppression. Their version of identity politics, then, is not the self-aggrandizing posturing we see today, but is itself a way to push attention toward the interlocking nature of forms of oppression.

The de-historization of black radical feminist thought has led to culture of exclusion that uses identity as a means of creating hierarchies of who gets to have an opinion, rather than opening the dialogue to form new coalitions and

forms of solidarity. Kimberley Foster, who runs the online forum *For Harriet*, a platform for black women to share their experiences and their work, critiques this flawed employment of identity politics in her article “Identity politics has veered away from its roots. It’s time to bring it back.” As she writes “identity politics becomes flimsy when they devolve into shallow back-and-forths that conflate lived experience with sound political analysis. A worldview that moves us closer to equality doesn’t stem from living in a certain kind of body. It emerges from pursuing a certain kind of politics” (Foster). Of course, experience affects political consciousness, but, as Foster points out, “lived experience is one form of knowledge that should be considered alongside others, and stories are most useful when assessed within a broader context of structural inequity” (Foster). Understanding feminism not as an identity or lifestyle, but rather as a political engagement, we recognize the necessity of creating dialogue and building coalition. One’s identity can be vital in informing movements and creating dialogue on issues otherwise ignored, “but treating identities as credentials discourages critical self-reflection” (Foster). By reclaiming feminism as a political engagement, and thus a collective work that must always be open to critique, we can discourage the exclusionary current in mainstream feminism which attempts to use identity as a means of silencing diverse viewpoints.

Overall, something must change. Mainstream feminism cannot continue to use intersectionality to absolve itself of its focus on white bourgeois women’s issues. If mainstream feminists are truly committed to ending oppression, they need to reimagine their engagement with women of color feminisms and their contributions to the movement. We do need mainstream feminists; we need an explosive mobilization of all people to change a structure that conditions every part of our lives. The movement for liberation cannot wait anymore, it cannot focus on reform when an entire revolution is necessary to end oppression. It is time for white liberal feminists to finally “check their privilege” and be engaged in the movement for the liberation of all people.

Conclusion

The act of concluding seems incorrect for a work as wholly insufficient as this one. Angela Davis reminds us to “focus on continuities rather than closures” (*Freedom* 64), and to see freedom as a constant struggle across time and space. So, in this final section of the paper I call for change. Though I support radical organizing which dares to call the very foundation of society into question, the change I ask for here is in our daily practice. The processes of decolonization, anti-racism, and anti-sexism require more than just lip service, more than just elevated discourse. Such a radical shift requires real and difficult work, which starts with an engaged and ongoing process of education.

Though many things must change in the ways mainstream feminists engage with women of color and other marginalized people, I want to call attention specifically to how we listen to each other. Speaking as a queer Asian-

American from a low-income background, I know firsthand how the narratives of non-white non-upper-class people are diminished, especially as I inhabit a space built to glorify and reproduce white liberal ideology. When we talk about things that are “exotic,” like the foods we grew up with or the odd tendencies of our families, we are put in the spotlight, asked to perform our difference for the white gaze. When white, upper-class students feel bad or uncomfortable, they look to us to absolve them, make them feel better about their privilege, but when we speak honestly about issues which have caused deep pain in our lives in ways that do not fit with the mainstream ideology, we are silenced. When we try to push the discourse, we are sidelined. We are told that we don’t understand, that the issues are “more complicated” than we present them, that we are being too emotional, and, of course, that we are not being “realistic.” This is yet another manifestation of privilege, both in the ability to choose when to stop listening and in the ability to shut down any opinions deemed too uncomfortable. Radical, revolutionary visions require discussion, they require us to be able to listen openly, not selectively. Listening to marginalized people should not be a chore relegated to specific exchanges so mainstream feminists can claim diversity, it should be a daily practice that expands the scope of our understanding.

Of course, I am also extremely privileged. It is not lost on me that I am a white-passing, “educated,” person who speaks of liberation even though my experience is nowhere near that of other marginalized people. I, too, am complicit in systems of oppression, but, in reality, we are all implicated in the oppression of other people. Again, neoliberal focus on the individual and individual credentials or capacities draws attention away from the systemic forces which condition our existence. My voice is but one opinion in a growing collective which seeks to radically transform the institutions in which we live. We must start with listening, with educating, with creating spaces that encourage revolutionary thinking. We must recognize our limitations as individuals and, in our daily practice, seek to engage in the work of community, of revolutionary collectivity. Ally-ship is insufficient, too distant, too safe. Let us engage in the project of liberation through collectivity, through comradeship, through a solidarity that does not essentialize our experiences, but recognizes the connectivity of systems of oppression and builds coalitions with the potential to dismantle imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.

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