

# Social Movement Intersectionality and Re-Centering Intersectional Activism

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## Abstract

In this paper, I argue that intersectional activism needs to be re-centered in intersectional studies and that research about social movement intersectionality offers one means of doing so. To demonstrate this argument, I review several examples that complicate our understanding of how social movement intersectionality is done in practice. I discuss how these examples reiterate the point that intersectional movements can be realized; illustrate how coalitions are varied but do work; and remind us that there are, nevertheless, unique constraints that those striving to do social movement intersectionality face—for example, the challenge of constructing critical collective consciousness. I close by discussing analytic strategies characterizing the emerging research on social movement intersectionality and lessons offered herein and I call for deeper inquiry to engage activist work and re-center activist knowledges in intersectionality studies.

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## Résumé

Dans cet article, je soutiens que l'activisme intersectionnel doit être recentré dans les études intersectionnelles et que la recherche sur l'intersectionnalité du mouvement social offre un moyen de le faire. Pour démontrer cet argument, je passe en revue plusieurs exemples qui compliquent notre compréhension de la façon dont l'in-

tersectionnalité des mouvements sociaux se fait dans la pratique. Je discute de la façon dont ces exemples réaffirment le fait que les mouvements intersectionnels peuvent être réalisés, illustrent comment les coalitions sont variées mais fonctionnent et nous rappellent qu'il existe néanmoins des contraintes uniques pour ceux qui s'efforcent de faire l'intersectionnalité du mouvement social—par exemple, le défi de construire une conscience collective critique. Je conclus en discutant les stratégies analytiques qui caractérisent les recherches émergentes sur l'intersectionnalité des mouvements sociaux et les leçons offertes ici et j'appelle à une enquête plus approfondie pour engager les travaux activistes et recentrer les connaissances activistes dans les études intersectionnelles.

## Confronting a Depoliticized Intersectionality Studies

Today, scholars of intersectionality are noting how “intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women’s studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far” (McCall 2005, 1771) and how its “increasing acceptance as a field of study within the academy is clearly evident” (Collins 2015, 6), so much so it is now being characterized as a “burgeoning field of intersectionality studies” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 785). Although many view the project of intersectionality as one where “both scholarship and practice are recursively linked, with practice being foundational to intersectional analysis” (Collins 2015, 5), critical reflections about the field today have pointed to a troubling trend of de-politicization (Bilge 2013; Collins 2015). This paper argues that research on social movement intersectionality holds important contributions we should not overlook and is crucial for restoring its political intent and reengaging activist communities.

A crucial component of intersectionality’s political legacy has been its critical engagement with the challenge of collective action and social movement resistance. Vivian May (2015) explains that “Intersectionality’s political genealogy connects to larger struggles to eradicate inequality and emphasizes the degree to which meaningful contestation requires collective action” (48). Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1991) work identifies political intersectionality, which she explains is the circumstance of politics in the form of single-axis movements that focus on one oppression and therefore serve to further marginalize the multiply marginalized (particularly feminists of colour in her discussion). In so doing, she effectively names social movement spaces as central to intersectional analysis (although, in this case, it is the limits of single-axis movements). Patricia Hill Collins (2015) explains how interpretive communities in social movement settings were the spaces where intersectional analysis emerged (especially for feminists of colour) before it travelled into the academy (8). The point is that, at core, intersectional scholarship emerged as an “activist scholarship” (May 2015, 162), an “insurgent knowledge” derived from collective action efforts of feminists and lesbians of colour (Bilge 2014, 175; Roth 2004; Springer 2005), before it moved into the academy.

Recent writings argue, however, that the move to (and establishment in) the academy has depoliticized

the field such that, as Collins (2015) cites Sirma Bilge (2013) as proclaiming, the central challenge may now be “saving intersectionality from (academic) intersectionality studies” (Collins 2015, 11). Collins warns against accepting the “stock story” of the field of intersectionality studies as beginning with the coining of the term in Crenshaw’s (1991) “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” She explains that “contemporary narratives concerning the emergence of intersectionality increasingly situate its origins as a field of study within academia” (Collins 2015, 10). This, she asserts, risks erasing its activist roots in communities of resistance (especially Black feminist ones). She reinterprets the story of Crenshaw’s “Mapping the Margins” and, rather than calling it the beginning of intersectionality studies, instead frames it as a useful marker for when “ideas of social movement politics became named and subsequently incorporated into the academy” (10). It is an account that cautions against losing track of intersectionality’s critical edge, and its social movement and activist groundings, as academic interests take over. Similarly, other work argues that the field has been “systematically depoliticized” (Bilge 2013, 405). Bilge (2013), for example, argues that “disciplinary feminism,” especially European forms of it centered on “metatheoretical musings” as well as the “whitening of intersectionality,” effectively marginalize the grounded work of feminists and queers of colour (405). For instance, she notes how it is whitened not by the whiteness of people doing it, but also via the act of overlooking contributions of “those who have multiple minority identities and are marginalized social actors—women of color and queers of color,” instead foregrounding the work of White feminists as central (412). May (2015) similarly traces patterns of de-politicization. She looks at the field of intersectionality studies and traces subtle and overt patterns of distortion and the slipping away from its political intent, which together serve to “evacuate intersectionality of its history, meanings and promise” (8). What each of these cautions suggest is that the field of intersectionality studies needs to be re-politicized in part by re-centering the collective resistance work of activists, especially those multiply marginalized.

There is another related risk that derives from accepting the stock story of intersectionality studies as beginning with Crenshaw’s (1991) “Mapping the Mar-

gins.” The story implies that intersectionality studies is a field defined in relation to the legal genre. As Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall (2013) state, “contextualizing the articulation of intersectionality in the legal academy draws out the conditions of its possibility” (789). While they speak of how legal intersectionality is bound by discursive relations to legal subjectivity, I argue that it also tends to foreground too narrow a focus on “political intersectionality” (Crenshaw 1991, 1252). Although fundamentally necessary to consider, I worry that developing a field of intersectionality studies with a primary concentration on political intersectionality risks overemphasizing the constraints of single-identity movements and implies an impossibility of collective intersectional activism. We risk neglecting the possibility of intersectional resistance strategies, processes, and knowledges.

This paper began in relation to my efforts as a feminist sociologist—talking with, and learning from, a group of gay men long engaged in anti-racist work. The men have taught me a great deal about the complexity of their efforts to create what might be called “collective intersectional consciousness” as well as how to do intersectional collective action. Yet in turning to academic research to help me understand some of what I was hearing from these men, I was surprised to find far less empirical work about intersectional practice and activism, specifically social movement intersectionality, than I expected. I now understand the relative paucity of such research as linked to the trend where some instantiations of intersectionality studies has neutralized and underemphasized its political intent (Bilge 2013; Collins 2015). Collins (2015) recently argued that more attention to intersectional practice in the field of intersectionality studies, especially in a way that is useful to its practitioners, is the core challenge of the field (17). She points to local small-scale grassroots work, social institutions, and human rights work as sites of critical intersectional praxis important to the field. In what follows, I discuss attention to social movements as another core site of intersectional practice important to intersectional studies.

My purpose in this piece is to review what we can learn about intersectional activism and how it is done in social movement contexts by reading and doing research about social movement intersectionality. In many respects, I fall in the category of people Bilge

(2013) characterizes as “those trying to reconnect intersectionality with its initial vision which was grounded in the political subjectivities and struggles of less powerful social actors facing multiple intertwined oppressions” (411). I am doing so through attention to social movement empirical studies as but one means of understanding how less powerful social actors do their work. I argue that we must not forget that “intersectionality understands oppression and resistance to be ongoing relational processes” (May 2015, 237). I suggest that by focusing (in part) on social movement intersectionality, we can better attend to the reflexive relationship between political intersectionality and social movement intersectionality and thus better attend to the dynamic of oppression and resistance. I adopt the term *social movement intersectionality* from Jennifer Chun, George Lipsitz, and Young Shin (2013) to indicate my focus on social movements that use intersectionality as a resource for organization to address multiple interlocking oppressions (917). I also use the term *intersectional movements* when discussing specific types of social movement intersectionality (that done by those similarly situated in the intersections). My discussion of the research that follows points to seemingly unique forms of intersectional resistance and suggests the necessity for more sustained engagement with research on social movement intersectionality.

That said, I make the assertion that social movement research can advance our understandings of intersectionality cautiously. Tomlinson (2013) warns against inappropriate criticism directed at intersectional scholarship, one manifestation of which is work rooted in “rhetorics of rejection and replacement,” which urges a distancing from “old intersectionality” (1002) that, she argues, furthers a tendency of attacking and disparaging important oppositional theory and not analyzing it (998). Similarly Jennifer Nash (2014) names a tendency to dismiss early intersectional work as “feminism-past,” effectively erasing the racialized context and meaning of these works, a point Bilge (2014) also makes. In making a claim, as part of this paper does, that social movement scholarship offers one corrective of sorts to some intersectional scholarship, I do so with the understanding that much empirical research on social movement intersectionality does not reject, but rather draws from and elaborates on, early intersectional work. My call for engaging social movement intersectional scholarship is

not meant to be a replacement for the oppositional theory of feminists (and LGBTQ+s) of colour, but instead a further engagement with it and an acknowledgement of its continuing relevance.

In addition, I want to clarify that I use the terms “intersectionality” in part because it is the term used to name, and critically reflect on, what some argue has become a field. That said, I recognize that there are different genres and types of intersectional studies being done. Some scholars differentiate between analyses focused on intersectionality versus interlocking oppressions and I agree that distinguishing between the two is not just “quibbly” (Carastathis 2008). Anna Carastathis (2008) reminds us that there are different types of analyses of oppression where “an analysis of the way that systems of oppression ‘interlock’ has as its point of focus the matrix of micro- and macropolitical relations that produce subjects, whereas intersectional analysis focuses on the subjects produced by those relations, conceived of in identic terms” (25). The social movement studies I discuss here often use the term “intersectional” to mean both and so I also use it; however, I return to this distinction in the conclusion where I point out how the examples I feature can be distinguished by these different analytic approaches.

Finally, I want to be clear about my position in light of recent notes about disciplinary shadows and shortsightedness. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) caution that it is important to be “mindful that disciplinary conventions import a range of assumptions and truth claims that sometimes contribute to the very erasures to which intersectionality draws attention” (793). While I laud the potential of social-science oriented research on social movements here, I am not advocating a return to only a social science approach or arguing against interdisciplinarity. My hope is that we can continue to develop an intersectional studies attentive to the knowledge and wisdom emerging from disciplines, interdisciplinarity, *and* always from communities of resistance. As one step toward that, in what follows, I discuss social science oriented research that details some ways that social movement intersectionality is being done.

### **Social Movement Intersectionality**

The following discussion is not a comprehensive portrait of vast literature (Inhorn 2004, 275), but should

be read as a sampling of some key works that highlight important understandings so far. The research I discuss here offers examples of how intersectional social movements are possible, especially in particular sites, examples of how intersectional coalitions work and play out differently in practice, and examples of some of the challenges faced in doing social movement intersectionality, especially that of constructing collective, yet intersectional, consciousness.

### ***Realizing Intersectional Social Movements***

Two intersectional social movement studies (Roth 2004; Springer 2005) add to the consideration of how and where social movement intersectionality is done. In the process of complicating a stock story of the second wave feminist movement, both of these studies also complicate the stock story of intersectional studies as a product of academia. They both detail examples of activists living at the intersections of multiple oppressions, doing collective action, and forming distinctive intersectional movements. Importantly, part of a stock story that names academia as the starting point of intersectionality, thereby obscuring the existence of activist communities and the knowledges derived from them, also tends to overemphasize a notion of social movements as single-axis identity movements—reproducing, not resisting, interlocking oppressions. While “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 1984), the studies I discuss below show that the master’s tools (social movements) can be understood (and configured) differently, in unique places, for resistance by those living in the intersections. In so doing, these cases advance intersectional studies by pushing us to consider social movements as viable forms of intersectional activism.

One way these studies highlight the possibilities generated by intersectional social movement work is by illustrating how similarly situated groups resist organizing based on simplistic identity logics. For example, Kimberly Springer (2005), in her study of five Black feminist organizations from 1968-1980, shows how the uniqueness of each of these Black feminist organizations “reflect the heterogeneity of black feminist’s political views” (63). In a careful study of these organizations, based on semi-structured oral history interviews from a Black feminist standpoint, she argues that Black feminists in these organizations differently told their

stories of emergence, recounted different organizational forms, had different paths to defining feminism, and differently incorporated the “plurality of black women’s lives” (115). Benita Roth (2004) similarly traces a story of feminisms. As she says, second wave feminisms were “plural and characterized by racial/ethnic organizational distinctiveness” (1). Relying on extensive archival data and nine interviews, she traces how Black and Chicana feminisms emerged in a social movement sector with many competing movements such that they ultimately became distinct feminisms. Through their separate research studies, Springer (2005) and Roth (2004) both illustrate how social movement intersectionality, especially that engaged in by feminists of colour in the second wave, was characterized by difference even when engaged by similarly situated groups in similar historical moments. It is a reminder that these forms of social movement intersectionality are not repackaged essentialist or nationalist single-identity politics, but instances of social movement intersectionality centering difference and multiplicity.

Springer (2005) and Roth (2004) also show how social movement intersectionality must be understood in terms of where it emerged and where it is practiced. Springer (2005) tells a story of how “Black feminists took advantage of openings in the political opportunity structure...” (15) to create their own movement. Springer’s work asserts that Black feminists fit their politics into their lives wherever possible and that, between the years of 1968 and 1980, developed a collective identity and basis for organizing that reflected the intersecting nature of Black womanhood—in that it operated in the cracks between oppressions and the spaces between movements. She characterizes such social movement intersectionality as interstitial politics or a “politics in the cracks” (2). She explains how the five Black feminist organizations “inserted themselves into the cracks of the dominant political opportunity structure and the fissures created by other social movements” (12). She pushes social movement scholarship by pinpointing the location of some social movement intersectional work, in the case of her research, as operating not only in the openings created because of political opportunity, but also in the spaces between movements. It is a contribution, Springer argues, that expands the meaning of political opportunity in social movement studies. Because, in single-axis social movements, many Black women

experienced “fissures created by contradictions in rhetoric and action” (46), they formed organizations that were not meant to be either feminist or civil rights, but both and existing outside each. In that sense, Springer’s work also challenges intersectional thinkers to consider how a protest cycle characterized by identity-rigid movements might simultaneously constitute interstitial spaces where critical social movement intersectionality can emerge with the agency of activists.

Roth (2004) traces similar, but distinctive, locations of social movement intersectional work. Like Springer (2005) discussed above, Roth traces the specificity of Black and Chicana feminisms of the second wave partly to their emergence from anti-racist movements (Black Nationalist and Chicano movements respectively). In her work, however, Roth (2004) extends the portrait of the context from which these feminisms emerged and outlines how their emergence was constrained by the competitive social movement sector where loyalties to parent movements, in addition to questions about liberation and an “ethos of organizing one’s own” (181), all worked together such that second-wave feminisms became distinctive along racial/ethnic lines (215). She urges us to think of social movement intersectionality as happening not so much in the cracks between movements, but as separate movements in and of themselves (albeit in a particular movement sector). Roth’s work reveals how social movement intersectionality is not necessarily something happening within one movement, or existing between single-identity movements, but in certain circumstances manifest as multiple stand-alone movements. Furthermore, Roth’s work also offers an “appreciation of the way in which social movement actors move in nested boxes of constraint” where movements interact and “the existence of numerous movements at one time constructs the choices that participants make about organizing” (216-217). Like Springer (2005), Roth’s work points those interested in social movement resistance to a reconsideration of political opportunity in intersectional terms. As Roth (2004) explains, her work shows how researchers need to “explore how constraints on or opportunities for social movement actors are mutually constructed by the elements of unequal and systematic social divisions, and by movements-based relationships among activists whose interactions cannot help but be shaped by those divisions” (217). At heart, Roth illus-

trates separate Black and Chicana feminist movements that are not exclusionary, but are situated movements in terms of the matrix of domination and political intersectionality they resist.

These works argue that social movements can be intersectional: existing as movements unto themselves, or as collectives of those multiply marginalized, and characterized by difference and multiplicity. As such, they push intersectional studies to take seriously the possibility of intersectional movements even in the face of the constraints of the political intersectionality of single-identity movements. Related, their work also challenges intersectional studies to take seriously the possibility that social movements (and their organizations) can be effective. These both are studies which challenge a stock story of second wave feminism that asserts that women of colour feminism emerged later in the second wave and was singular and simply a response to White feminism. Instead, these studies provide convincing portraits of social movement intersectionality where women of colour acted effectively as collective movement makers operating on their own and producing parallel feminisms. These are not portraits of failed movements. Although Springer (2005) details how the Black feminist organizations she studied all but disappeared by 1980 and Roth (2004) clearly illustrates how the Black feminist and Chicana feminist movement faced hostilities from other movements, both authors argue that the movements did succeed in forming, existing, and creating critical knowledge and interventions in the specific political context in which they emerged. Thus, these works provide important intersectional portraits of the agency of feminists of colour and their successful social movement work, which should be credited with creating critical consciousness from which some intersectional theory in academia developed (Springer 2005, 168; Collins 2015). They illustrate how intersectional movements by multiply-marginalized activists can be realized and thrive in particular sites.

That said, the works discussed in this section portray the social movement intersectionality of historically specific and similarly-situated groups. They identify movements that operate separately (whether interstitially or unto themselves) because of the political landscape in which they emerged. Thus, while these works remind us that intersectional movements can be realized, and are sources of critical intersectional

knowledge, they also underscore the point that different historical contexts are particularly relevant and can broaden our understanding of how the political landscape impacts social movement intersectionality.

### ***Working Coalitions***

In addition to revealing effective intersectional movements, the research on social movement intersectionality also illustrates that intersectional coalitions do work. In describing the dangers of adopting the stock story of intersectionality studies as originating in the academy, Collins (2015) reasserts "...the centrality of both Black feminism and race/class/gender studies to social justice projects..." (10) and the emergence of one genre of intersectional studies. She identifies a set of "shared sensibilities" that scholar-activists in early race/class/gender studies had, one of which was a commitment to coalitional politics as a means by which to confront the dilemma of how to do group-based activism in terms of difference. For example, Bonnie Thornton Dill (1983) suggested abandoning a false ideal of sisterhood and instead striving toward coalition along lines of shared interest (146). Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983) called for the uncomfortable work of coalition as a space where difference could be confronted. And in 1989, Collins herself called for seeing race, class, and gender as "categories of connection" (rather than sameness) and working toward "relationships and coalitions to bring about social change" (Collins 2013a, 222). She outlined how effective coalitions must address differences in power and privilege, seek to organize around a common cause, and finally struggle "to hear one another and (develop) empathy for the other points of view" (225). Yet, in reflecting on this call in 2013, Collins comments that, in the current political landscape, "Coalitions seem like pipe dreams" (2013b, 234).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Carastathis (2013) stresses how other voices have argued that intersectionality is divisive and actually limits possibility for unity or coalition (942). However, recent research about social movement intersectionality suggests that that is not the case; coalitions can work and do so in distinctive ways.

Research on how social movement intersectional coalitions are done in practice often portrays them as operating much like early conceptualizations described. For example, Elizabeth Cole (2008), in discussing her oral history research with ten feminist ac-

tivists, describes their coalition work as troubling the idea of “natural affinity groups,” recognizing the “limits of similarity” and seeking to find commonality around shared interests instead of shared identity (447). She also notes how participants spoke of power differences as a threat to groups working in alliance and coalition. In many respects, Cole’s work outlines a social movement intersectional strategy of coalition quite similar to the calls outlined above (Collins 2013a; Dill 1983; Reagon 1983) where working in terms of shared interest between groups to negotiate difference and avoid simplistic identity politics was the ideal put into practice.

Yet, other examples of social movement research about intersectional coalition work suggest some varied ways coalitions are successfully practiced in everyday movement work. Carastathis (2013) proposes a reconsideration of identity as coalition, explicitly drawing on Crenshaw’s conceptualization of identities as “in fact coalitions” (942). She points out how Crenshaw’s conceptualization challenges the distinction between identity politics and coalitional politics as based on similarity and safety (identity) versus difference and conflict (coalition) respectively. Carastathis traces the way in which a coalitional conception of identity was used in one organization, *Somos Hermanas*, a United States-based group formed in the 1980s in solidarity with Nicaraguan women. She shows how they did their work by advancing a coalitional conception of identity, which allowed them to find commonality and operate in solidarity (2013, 954). Carastathis speaks of one activist’s story and how that activist spoke of the group as a place to bring together all her “multiple identities and political commitments” (944). She outlines how they were able to operate as a “coalition of one, in which one is aligned with all parts of oneself, especially those we are taught to deny, repress or annihilate” (960). According to Carastathis, it is a means of addressing the “intersectionality within” and “constructing internal as well as external bridges” (960). In comparison to Cole’s (2008) conception of coalition based on affinity between different groups, Carastathis (2013) illustrates how one group organized in a way that honoured the “multiplicity and contradictions” of individual identities for those multiply oppressed (961).

In contrast to Carastathis’ (2013) portrait of “in fact coalition,” Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin (2013) detail a different type of coalition as part of their broader de-

scription of intersectional social movement strategy. Like Carastathis, Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin (2013) discuss the work of a social movement organization, but, in their research, they focus on Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA), a group that started in 1983 and organized as a community organization for Asian immigrant women employed in low-paid manufacturing and service jobs in the San Francisco area. They speak of “intersectionality” as the strategy AIWA illustrates and describe it as centered on a guiding assumption that those with the experiences of living at the intersections of multiple oppressions are equipped with “the evidence, ideas, insights and ambitions that can help solve serious social problems” (919). Thus, AIWA organizes in terms of a “community transformational organizing strategy (CTOS),” which puts the immigrant women in a group at the center and seeks to have them define the work of the organization. Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin (2013) illustrate how AIWA was doing a type of alliance/coalition work that centered women workers in collective efforts for social change and in forming unique, but successful, alliances. In contrast to Cole (2008) and Carastathis (2013), Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin (2013) do not emphasize coalition as a matter of figuring out how to practice group politics that can attend to difference. Instead, they stress the goal of centering the experiential critical knowledge of those living at (and resisting) the intersections of multiple interlocking oppressions. It is a means of coalitional practice that primarily seeks to address and change differences in power and privilege within the coalition.

In contrast to the previous section, which stressed the similarities between the studies being discussed, in this section, I discussed three studies separately to highlight the differences because one of the contributions of these works is that they push intersectional studies scholars in the academy to recognize and understand the subtle differences in how coalition is done. As these pieces illustrate, coalition for some groups is done in terms of shared interest, for others the emphasis is on honoring the plurality of identities and multiplicity of interests, while still others foreground differences in power, knowledge, and leadership as core to how coalitions are done. An important characteristic of all three studies is that they illustrate coalitions formed among multiply-situated activists and point to how social movement intersectionality can be done

across differences and varying levels of power of multiple social groups.

### ***The Challenge of Collective Consciousness and Constraints on Social Movement Intersectionality***

In 1977, the Combahee River Collective released a statement that many still reference as a critical articulation of an intersectionality rooted in United States Black lesbian feminism. The statement explained that members of the group had been involved in other single-axis identity movements, but felt “disillusioned” and so sought to create their own movement. They spoke of not giving up on the notion of an identity movement where personal experience and consciousness-raising would be fundamental. As they stated, “The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated (Combahee River Collective 1983, 211). I begin this section with a brief discussion of that statement to remind readers that a political understanding of intersectionality has often been named as arising out of the hard consciousness-raising work centered in the life experience of those living at the intersections of multiple interlocking oppressions. Collins (1990) states, for example, that “One distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought is its insistence that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change” (221). Many feminists of colour have returned to the point that a collective critical consciousness is central to an effective intersectional politics (Collins 1990, 2013a; Crenshaw 1991, 1265; Harris 1990; Sandoval 1991) while acknowledging the challenges to centering such a consciousness in a broader movement of multiply-situated actors (e.g., Sandoval 1991). I begin this section by noting the centrality of consciousness and the complexity of it in collective action because I am highlighting two examples of research that provide important developments to our understanding thereof in social movement arenas. The cases I discuss below outline the challenge of constructing collective intersectional consciousness in social movements and, in so doing, detail some constraints on social movement intersectionality.

The first example is Brett C. Stockdill’s (2003) book, *Activism Against Aids: At the Intersections of Sex-*

*uality, Race, Gender and Class*, which draws on his in-depth interview and participant observation research about AIDS organizing in the 1980s and 1990s to show how social problems are often situated at the intersection of multiple oppressions impacting collective action. His research illustrates, for example, how various actors in AIDS activism had “partial oppositional consciousness” (a term he adopts from Morris 1992, 364, but extends), especially hegemonic or dominant strains (for example, white, middle-class gay men as only focused on homophobia and AIDSphobia to the exclusion of racism, sexism, and classism), which served as obstacles to AIDS prevention, intervention, and also activism (Stockdill 2003, 23). Consequently, according to Stockdill, certain initiatives meant to address multiple oppressions were not as well supported as other single-axis focused initiatives. As well, coalition building was impacted by differing expectations and experiences of repression (for example, gay/lesbian communities of colour had a history and fear of more extreme state repression and this made many hesitate to become involved in the direct action AIDS activism). Yet, he also outlines how strategies by gay men and lesbians of colour to combat AIDS in communities of colour included innovative (and familiar intersectional) techniques of dialogue, empowerment, and community-centered work. He argues that this was work that used racial oppositional consciousness to “promote other forms of oppositional consciousness” (23). A key contribution that Stockdill offers intersectional studies is his portrait of how activists are “drawn into collective action within the context of *multiple* oppressions and *multiple* consciousnesses” (18) and those varied consciousnesses impact the collective action ultimately done (or not). Especially important is that Stockdill’s work attends to the significance of consciousness among 50 activists he interviewed who were involved in various organizations in different regions and differently situated in the intersections of race/class/gender/sexuality. In that respect, he also extends intersectionality studies’ understanding of consciousness beyond the specificity of consciousness among a similarly-situated group to attend to how such critical consciousness gets employed in practice in a community of multiple consciousnesses.

Rose Ernst’s (2010) book, *The Price of Progressive Politics: The Welfare Rights Movement in an Era of Colorblind Racism*, similarly reveals important new un-



derstandings of consciousness. Her research is based on interviews with 49 welfare parent activists, both women of colour and white activists, from eight different organizations. She found that "...women-of-colour activists...confront the intersectional implications of the welfare queen and, by extension, the racial ideology of colorblind racism, while White women activists tend to avoid direct discussions of these issues" (3). Ernst identifies "cosmetic colorblindness," which she explains operates when mostly white welfare activists spoke of race directly, but did so in terms of racial demographics to avoid direct discussion of racism and power dynamics. Yet she also traces how some activists avoid colourblindness frames and instead use race and class consciousness frames, thereby confronting racism. She explains that the difference in what type of framing work is done emerges from the intersectional character of organizations, the organizational structure and racial composition of leadership in particular, that impact whether there can be the creation of "shared race and class consciousness frames among both women of color and White women" (139). In the end she argues that her book illustrates how "movements premised on multiple marginalized identities that fail to develop consciousness frames that reflect the reality of these intersecting identities ultimately reproduce the very societal dynamics they seek to change" (17). In contrast to Stockdill's (2003) work, Ernst's (2010) work is focused on how consciousness plays out in terms of the framing work of movements. Yet, like Stockdill, Ernst similarly argues that the creation of oppositional consciousness, in her case central to the framing work of social movements, is tied in part to the social location of individuals. It is partly the social location of individuals and their race and class consciousness that impacts their framing and can negatively impact movements striving to work across these different meanings. Like Stockdill, Ernst is extending the understanding of consciousness in intersectionality studies by showing how, in practice, intersectional movements must confront how to effectively work with multiple situated consciousnesses. In detailing the impact of partial oppositional consciousness and colourblind framing to collective action, Stockdill and Ernst specifically unveil the central challenge of developing an intersectional consciousness among activists and organizations with multiple situated consciousnesses. In so doing, they extend the under-

standing of critical consciousness in intersectionality studies by illustrating how there are limits to achieving a multidimensional consciousness in practice.

These examples point to specific challenges of doing collective action among multiply-situated individuals and groups. While research suggests that intersectional social movements can be realized and coalitional organizations can work, the work discussed in this section suggests that collective intersectional action is nevertheless challenged by patterns of interlocking inequalities within and outside the movement that impacts its potential. Stockdill (2003), for example, highlights how all the mechanics of social movements (strategy, tactics, framing, resources, and organization) confront the challenges of multiple interlocking oppressions (especially because of dynamics of partial oppositional consciousness). In that regard, Stockdill contributes to intersectional studies an understanding of what I think of as movement matrixes: dynamics of interlocking oppressions that characterize the problems such movements face and how they are collectively resisted. Ernst (2010) highlights how political intersectionality still plays out in certain movements, but uniquely so because of changing political landscapes, organizational structures, and leadership composition. It might be said that Stockdill pushes us to consider how there may be distinctive movement matrixes, of the social problems confronted and collective action employed in resisting them, and Ernst pushes us to recognize the continued relevance and new forms of political intersectionalities. In Collins' (2000) words, in detailing the limits of consciousness in relation to the unique patterns of interlocking movement inequalities, these studies remind us that "oppression and resistance remain intricately linked such that the shape of one influences that of the other" (274). They detail the particularities of how that works at the movement level in what we might consider a dialectic of social movement intersectionality and political intersectionalities/movement matrixes.

Even as they detail the constraints on social movement intersectionality, these books reiterate a point made in the previous two sections—that social movement intersectionality is possible, in particular spaces. For example, while both studies offer compelling discussions of a foundational intersectional concept—consciousness—and detail the limits of partial or colourblind consciousness, they also identify instances

where multidimensional consciousness was practiced. They remind us that social movement intersectionality is constrained and point to the necessity for further empirical engagement with activist communities to see where and how it can thrive.

### Concluding Thoughts

While I have argued that research on social movement intersectionality reveals important lessons about how intersectional resistance and practice is done collectively, it must be considered in relation to how the research was done. Bilge (2013) suggests that “speculative” musings without “much empirical grounding” confines intersectionality to an academic exercise and depoliticizes it. She is clear that paying attention to “what intersectionality actual does in research” is important (412). She reminds us that Crenshaw’s statement in response to the *Celebrating Intersectionality* conference also suggests that to “canvass what scholars, activists, and policy makers have done under its rubric” is a means of attending to the question of what intersectionality can produce (Crenshaw 2011, 222 cited in Bilge 2013, 412). Similarly, Collins (2015) canvasses the research done to understand what it has become and what it offers (11). Thinking in terms of these assertions of the importance of paying attention to what researchers actually do analytically and methodologically, it is critical to recognize that the emerging research discussed in this paper might well be characterized in terms of Leslie McCall’s (2005) distinction between intracategorical and intercategorical complexity and/or Sherene Razack’s (1998) distinction between interlocking and intersectional analysis (further elaborated by Carastathis 2008, 25). Namely, as illustrated by my discussion in the first section, there is important work that details the possibility and realization of intersectional movements, that is to say work that analytically pays attention to the complexities and strategies of forming social movements among those (mostly) within single social groups<sup>2</sup>—intracategorical research in McCall’s (2005) terms. In addition, there is social movement research that is more intercategorical in that it analytically pays attention to the “complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytic categories” (1786). In the second section, I detailed examples of such research that outlined working strategies for coalitional organization. As illustrated in the

third section, there is also important work detailing the constraints and challenges of social movement intersectionality, especially in constructing critical consciousness in movements comprised of multiple social groups and relations of interlocking inequality. In other words, research about social movement intersectionality is done both intracategorically and intercategorically. In Razack’s (1998) words, research on social movement intersectionality focuses both on interlocking oppressions and intersections. It might be said that the studies in the first section of this paper focused on the intersections and patterns of resistance and, in the second and third sections, on interlocking oppressions and how those manifest in movement resistance. I close by noting these different analytic strategies to make the point that social movement research, like intersectionality studies more generally, is marked by different analytic approaches. As we move forward, I recommend further critical reflection about these strategies and the implications they might have on our understanding of social movement intersectionality in practice.

In this paper, I have argued that these social movement studies highlight important contributions to the field of intersectionality studies. They offer “more complex analyses of collective action” (Collins 2013b, 242) by broadening our understanding of key dimensions of collective intersectional action. The first section highlighted two examples (Roth 2004; Springer 2005) that confront the assumption that intersectional collective resistance is not possible by illustrating that social movement intersectionality is viable, intersectional social movements are possible, and intersectional collective action practices can be effective. The next section continued to illustrate how social movement intersectionality can be realized, focusing on coalitions (Cole 2008; Carastathis 2013; Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin 2013) and extending our understanding of coalition beyond merely politics organized around shared purpose and power to detail the complex intricacies of how it plays out differently in practice among multiply-situated actors. Finally, in the last section, I discussed two examples (Stockdill 2003; Ernst 2010) that extend our understanding of another core concept of intersectional practice—consciousness—and illustrate the restrictions on achieving a collective intersectional consciousness in practice, especially in movements of multiply-situated actors. These pieces also point out how interlocking

oppressions uniquely manifest in movements and thus constrain social movement intersectionality. Together, these studies illustrate how research on social movement intersectionality, while not yet a deep literature, nevertheless offers significant insights for intersectionality studies. But my assertion that these are important examples for intersectionality studies is meant to be more than simply a call to appreciate the existing literature and an empiricist request to pay more attention to the lessons these studies have taught us about the reality of activism out there.

As I have discussed, one risk we face in intersectional studies is accepting a stock story of it as beginning in academia and contributing the most by continuing to reside uncritically there. As many have reminded us, intersectionality studies is at risk of not being quite intersectional enough if it neglects its origins outside of the academy. It risks disregarding activist knowledges, especially those produced collectively by people with the everyday experiences of living at the intersections of interlocking oppressions and/or in active resistance to them in organizations and movements. So my call for more research engagement with social movement intersectionality is not meant to be only a suggestion for reading and doing more research. It is also meant to be a broader call for re-centering the work of activists, especially those critically located at the intersections and/or resisting interlocking oppressions, and thereby actively achieving critical situated standpoint knowledges through, and of, intersectional practice. As my brief citations of early activist/scholar writings suggest, one way to engage with activist work that has characterized the field is to read texts produced by activists with the assumption that they represent valid oppositional knowledge projects. I propose that reading the research I discussed in this piece is another way to do so. The research that I examined here was often done by scholar/activists (e.g., Stockdill 2003) or in collaboration between activists and scholars (e.g., Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin 2013) or utilizing standpoint epistemology and feminist methods to center the experience and knowledge of activists (e.g., Cole 2008; Springer 2005). It is research that, if discussed for its methodology and strategies of intersectional analysis, might be understood as bridging work, re-centering activist voices and reigniting an exchange between activist and academic arenas through relationships of shared interest. We need to

re-center activist work and, as researchers, I think we can do so through more interaction with these communities. It is not the only way to re-center intersectional activism in intersectional studies, but in light of some of the meta-theorizing, whitening, and patterns of de-politicization that characterize some genres of intersectional studies in academia, more serious engagement of such grounded consideration of social movement intersectionality, in my opinion, is one necessary step.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Actually, Collins (2013b) holds onto the potential of coalitional politics, explaining that “communities constitute the scaffold on which coalitional politics operate.” Thus, she urges engagement with coalitional strategies within and outside of communities (236-241).

<sup>2</sup> I include the parenthetical note of “mostly” because both Springer (2005) and Roth (2004) speak to the multiplicity of identities within groups of Black feminists and the Black feminist and Chicana feminist movements.

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