

What's Intersectional about Intersectionality Now?

Cluster Editors

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Our desire to think through the authority of intersectionality in contemporary praxis in the field(s) of gender, women's, and sexuality studies was inspired by a number of thoughtful presentations at the "International Intersectionality Conference" hosted by the Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy (IIRP) at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver in 2014. IIRP was particularly interested in presentations that engaged "the uses and 'abuses' of intersectionality" (IIRP 2014). Our presentation focused on the challenges and possibilities of institutionalized intersectionality—on how intersectionality, as an invaluable critical lens, is an expected feature of feminist work and yet might be exploited by a privileged intellectual class to reinforce oppressive boundaries of belongingness in the academy through the wielding of intersectionality as a learned skill. As intersectionality is understood as the most important theoretical, analytical, and methodological tool in gender, women's, and sexuality studies and as its mainstreaming marks a paradigm shift in feminist praxis (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013; McCall 2005; Nash 2008), we wondered: what work is being done in its name and in what fields of inquiry and practice? And what are the implications of this work for those whose experiences intersectionality was designed to center, namely women of colour?

Following the coining of the term "intersectionality" by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, feminist scholars, educators, practitioners, and activists have aspired to do intersectional work. The popularity of intersectionality in the interdiscipline of gender, women's, and sexuality studies has allowed increasingly sophisticated analyses of systems of power that reflect the complexity of everyday lives and the ways in which identities are assembled on and through encounters of flesh. Yet, the institutionalization of intersectionality has, at times, led to the hollowing-out and de-politicization of the term. For example, we were, and still are, concerned with how intersectionality theory has emerged as a mainstay in introductory gender,

women's, and sexuality studies courses and how both students and instructors of diverse experiences and political orientations deploy the term "intersectionality" in pursuit of academic and, of course, financial reward without necessarily engaging with intersectionality's theoretical, analytical, and/or methodological models.

Such apprehensions about our own utilization of intersectionality at our home institutions and our desire to put together a special cluster on the topic as white scholars draws from critical work in the area, namely Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall's (2013) special issue of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* entitled "Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory." It in, scholars raise important questions about "the utility and limitations" of intersectionality. Inspired by Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall's (2013) special issue of *Signs* and the "International Intersectionality Conference" conference, we proposed this special cluster to *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice* in order to collect some of the presentations from the conference and to invite other scholars into the conversation.

Asking "What is Intersectional About Intersectionality Now?" we are borrowing from David L. Eng, J. Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz's (2005) *Social Text* collection entitled "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?" which takes stock of queer theoretical interventions into what they call "a wide field of social critique" (1). Here, we host a cluster of articles that take stock of intersectional interventions into a wide field of social critique to participate in, and expand upon, a burgeoning field of intersectionality studies.

A central concern in the field of intersectionality, which is taken up by this cluster, is the shifting focus of analysis from Black women and Black feminism to other subjects and subjectivities. As Catharine A. MacKinnon (2013) reminds feminist scholars in the special issue of *Signs*, intersectionality begins at the concrete experiences of classes of people in hierarchical relations and, as such, it is a "distinctive stance," an "angle of vision," that "reveals women of color at the center of overlapping systems of subordination" (1020). This simple prompt reinforces intersectionality as a political practice that can never be reduced to academic theory that is distanced from the experience of women

of colour. As many of the authors of this cluster expound, including Manjeet Birk's commentary on her own experience in feminist classrooms and Khatidja Chantler and Ravi Thiara's work on Black and minority ethnic women's experiences of violence, the risk of the institutionalization of intersectionality alongside conventional critical theory, methods, and advocacy is that organizing modes of identity along axes too often "ignore the social forces of power that rank and define them relationally within and without" (MacKinnon 2013, 1023).

Another central concern of this cluster, shared by Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013), is the field's continually shifting and expanding scope. As Cho, Crenshaw and McCall note, intersectionality theory emerged in legal studies, which means that intersectionality theory, even as it shows up in gender, women's, and sexuality studies—where it has found an institutional "home,"—has already moved away the original subject of the field. They term this travelling of intersectionality the "centrifugal process" and warn that the travelling of intersectionality in and through disciplinary fields both opens and binds what intersectionality can do in those disciplines (793). One such example of this expansion of intersectionality theory in this cluster is Rhea Hoskin's work on femme identities and the social power of femmephobia, which has, to this point, been a gap in intersectionality studies. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall consider this kind of expansion a sign of the creativity of scholars and the open possibilities of inquiry in the field.

The eleven contributions in this cluster unfold the failures, successes, gaps, possibilities, questions, and concerns at the heart of intersectionality studies and plot the constitutive functioning of the political, economic, and social at this historical moment. The papers represent a range of approaches to understanding the contemporary workings of intersectionality theories, analytics, and methods through a diverse context of social critique. Articles in this cluster reflect upon the state of the field as intersectionality is institutionalized and popularized, paying particular attention to the utilization of intersectionality theory, analytics, and methods and the centrality of Black feminism and women of colour to the field. Contributors also participate in the "centrifugal process" of intersectionality studies by broadening the scope of the field—filling gaps in

scholarship and allowing intersectionality to travel to new spaces of inquiry.

This cluster covers four major themes in the ongoing debates and dialogues of intersectionality studies: 1) institutionalization of intersectionality; 2) “doing” intersectionality; 3) subjects of intersectionality; and 4) the translation of intersectionality. The first three themes engage in theoretical and practical conversations about the state of the field and related activism. Each contributor pushes at the barriers, boundaries, gaps, disjunctures, and fissures of intersectionality studies. The final theme on the translation of intersectionality (and assemblage) between French and English is one that is new to the scholarly conversation and we are particularly pleased to publish these two important articles on the “uses and abuses” of the language of intersectionality.

Theme 1: Institutionalization of Intersectionality

This cluster begins with Manjeet Birk’s commentary on three separate “symptoms” of institutionalized intersectionality in undergraduate and graduate classrooms. Referring to such instances as “things that make you go hmmm,” Birk carefully recounts her experiences as a woman of colour where intersectionality was being taught, and also deployed, by classmates and colleagues.

Patrick Grzanka, Rajani Bhatia, Mel Michelle Lewis, Sheri L. Parks, Joshua Woodfork, and Michael Casiano’s “Intersectionality, Inc.: A Dialogue on Intersectionality’s Travels and Tribulations” is an abridged transcript of a two-hour conversation organized around intersectionality’s institutionalization. This dialogue offers insight into the ways in which intersectionality is incorporated and co-opted in the academy and other social justice sites.

Theme 2: “Doing” Intersectionality

Michele Tracy Berger’s “Does Intersectional Training Endure? Examining Trends in a Global Database of Women’s And Gender Studies Graduates (1995-2010)” presents the findings of an online global survey of 571 Women’s and Gender Studies graduates, which was designed to assess how graduates applied intersectional thinking in their professional and/or personal lives. She maintains that “understanding intersectional thinking as constituting a skill and/

or enabling the facilitation of other skills...would potentially serve students better, encourage increased curricular coherence about intersectionality, and suggests a maturation of intersectionality’s importance in the field.”

K.L. Broad’s article “Social Movement Intersectionality and Re-Centering Intersectional Activism,” complicates how social movements practice intersectionality. Arguing that movements need to re-centre activist knowledge in intersectionality studies, Broad explores the complications and challenges of “doing” intersectionality.

“#Intersectionality: The Fourth Wave Feminist Twitter Community” by Teagan Zimmerman examines “doing” intersectionality online. Zimmerman analyses #solidarityisforwhitewomen and suggests that such intersectional practices offer necessary dialogue on race, feminism, and online representation in the fourth wave of feminism.

Caroline Hodes’ “Intersectionality in the Canadian Courts: In Search of a Decolonial Politics of Possibility” focuses on Canadian anti-discrimination law and examines the Lockean foundation of the concept of identity. Ultimately, Hodes argues that unless intersectionality is taken seriously in anti-discrimination law, it will continue to reproduce essentialisms and epistemic violence.

Theme 3: Subjects of Intersectionality

Khatidja Chantler and Ravi Thiara’s “We Are Still Here: Re-Centring the Quintessential Subject of Intersectionality” focuses on violence against women in Black and minority ethnic communities in the UK in order to argue that centering the experiences and knowledges of women of colour is essential to intersectionality. Troubled by the travel of intersectionality into various subjects of study, they argue that the focus on race and racism should not be displaced in theory, policy, and praxis.

Excavating the gaps of intersectionality studies, Rhea Ashley Hoskin’s “Femme Theory: Refocusing the Intersectional Lens” investigates the erasure and silence of queer feminist theorizing of femininities. Arguing that, while there is substantial literature on masculinity and, in fact, an entire field of study devoted to the subject, femininities have been given much less space. Hoskin maintains that understanding femme identities and the

functioning of femmephobia across lines of difference is essential to the field of intersectionality studies.

Further pushing the boundaries of intersectionality studies, Karen Stote's "Decolonizing Feminism: From Reproductive Abuse to Reproductive Justice" outlines a decolonial and intersectional approach to reproductive justice that centres the lived experiences of Indigenous women in Canada. Arguing for a revolutionary transformation of reproductive rights toward reproductive justice, Stote claims that a grounded commitment to intersectionality is key.

Theme 4: The Translation of Intersectionality

The last theme focuses on language and translation. Alexandre Baril's "Intersectionality, Lost in Translation? (Re)thinking Inter-sections between Anglophone and Francophone Intersectionality," suggests that Francophone academics are more likely to discuss language issues in their work on intersectionality while Anglophone studies of intersectionality problematize other topics, including transphobia and cisgender normativity. Baril maintains that Anglophone studies should take language more seriously while Francophone studies of intersectionality must pay attention to trans identities and experiences.

Anna Bogic's "Theory in Perpetual Motion and Translation: Assemblage and Intersectionality in Feminist Studies" explores the re-reading of intersectionality as assemblage and calls for a further examination of assemblage as a theoretical concept, including its translational history from French to English. Bogic argues that the translation of *agencement* to *assemblage* has particular impacts in the field of intersectionality studies that must be fully assessed and understood.

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