

9

INTERSECTIONALITY

Vivian M. May

Though the late twentieth century marked the emergence of intersectionality in the critical lexicon (specifically by Kimberlé Crenshaw [2000] in her 1989 essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”), many insights encompassed by the term had been developed and articulated by women of color for over a century. Beverly Guy-Sheftall traces nearly two centuries of intersectional theorizing¹ by black women in *Words of Fire* (see especially her essay, “Evolution” [1995b]). As Barbara Smith emphasizes, “History verifies that Black women have rejected doormat status, whether racially or sexually imposed, for centuries” (1983, xxiii). While U.S. black feminist thought is not the only place where intersectional thought has been developed (e.g., there is a strong thread of intersectional analysis within Latina feminism(s), and Indigenous feminists have long asserted analyses informed by interdependence and interconnection), intersectionality’s beginnings in black feminist theorizing are noteworthy. Unfortunately, this longer history is often overlooked.

For instance, in the 1830s, Maria Stewart anticipated many aspects of intersectionality in developing “the beginnings of an analytical framework within which to understand the lives of black women” and, at the same time, establishing a “political framework that could prove useful for challenging many of the oppressive structures confronted by black women” (Jordan-Zachery 2007, 255). As Julia Jordan-Zachery

underscores, a “liberation framework” has long been central to intersectionality (256), meaning questions concerning positionality, knowledge, and freedom are interconnected and must be considered together.² Likewise, as I have previously argued,³ late nineteenth-century black feminist educator, intellectual, and activist Anna Julia Cooper developed intersectional analyses and methods in two major works: her 1892 volume, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (1988), the first book-length example of black feminist theorizing in the United States, and her 1925 Sorbonne doctoral thesis, *L'Attitude de la France à l'égard de l'esclavage pendant la révolution*, in which Cooper examines the transatlantic dynamics of the Haitian and French revolutions.

Unfortunately, this longer history of intersectional thought is not as widely recognized as it should be in much of the Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) literature even though, at the same time, intersectionality has impacted curricular, pedagogical, methodological, and theoretical work in the field. As an epistemological approach, intersectionality offers tools to examine the politics of everyday life (e.g., the lived experiences of privilege and oppression, the implications and structures of marginalization, and the phenomenological and political meanings of identity). It is equally pivotal in analyzing social institutions, systems, and structures. Intersectionality exposes how conventional approaches to inequality, including feminist, civil rights, and liberal rights models, tend to: mistakenly rely on single-axis modes of analysis and redress; deny or obscure multiplicity or compoundedness; and depend upon the very systems of privilege they seek to challenge.

While intersectionality's meaning is neither static nor unified, continuities have emerged over time. Intersectional analyses have been developed as a means to foreground race as a central factor shaping gendered experience, emphasizing that addressing racism is fundamental to feminism and vice versa, and to contest the false universalization of gender as monolithic, as with the false universalization of race and racialized experience. Intersectional analyses highlight and address erasures and silences in historical and political records resulting from false universals. By starting from the premise that systems of power and lived identities can be best understood as intertwined and not merely as plural, intersectionality entails alternative notions of subjectivity (Alarcón 1990) and consciousness (Sandoval 2000). Crenshaw's naming of intersectionality

is important because the term provides a means to identify longstanding intellectual and political projects examining the workings of power and privilege, underscoring the politics of location, and refashioning notions of personhood at work in the body politic.

Yet it is also the case that intersectionality has (and has had) quite a varied role in WGS. For many, it is analytically, pedagogically, and politically central. Some view intersectionality as one among many choices in the marketplace of feminist ideas, whereas others see it as an historical stage whose time has passed. Intersectionality has also been characterized as intangible under an “impossibility thesis”—i.e., doing intersectional teaching, theorizing, research, or politics is regarded as an ideal but *not actually achievable*. As Stephanie Shields documents, “In conventional social and behavioral research, intersectionality frequently becomes redefined as a methodological challenge.... [For instance,] psychological scientists have typically responded to the question of intersectionality in one of three ways: excluding the question; deferring the question; limiting the question” (2008, 305).

The unevenness of intersectionality’s uses, approaches, and conceptualizations demonstrates WGS’ complex terrain. I maintain, however, that the field’s future does not lie in tokenizing intersectionality, treating it as an obligation, or pushing it aside as an impractical vision or intellectual relic. As a result of my time spent researching Anna Julia Cooper, I have become convinced of the need for more nuanced understandings of intersectionality: repeatedly, I found that an inadequate understanding of intersectionality, even in its contemporary iterations, means that Cooper’s innovative ideas and complex analyses are widely misunderstood. While Cooper articulates how race, gender, class, and region (and later, nation) interdepend and cannot be examined as isolatable, many of her contemporaries and later scholars examining her work could not seem to fully grasp her arguments—in large part because Cooper’s words and ideas were examined via single-axis frameworks, either/or models of thought, or measures of rationality that could not account for multiplicity. The precepts used to interpret Cooper have often run counter to the ideas she was developing.

An inability to fully understand the philosophical and political worldview that intersectionality entails is not unique to assessments of scholars such as Cooper. Intersectional analyses frequently have been

received as illogical, lacking, or incomprehensible, as Audre Lorde's query suggests: "We find ourselves having to repeat and relearn the same old lessons over and over.... For instance, how many times has this all been said before?" (1984, 117). Therefore, intersectionality's recursiveness should not simply be characterized as recycling as Nash suggests (2008, 9), because the ongoing need to reiterate points about how engaging with intersectionality requires a major shift in thinking.

The struggle to comprehend and implement intersectionality is epistemologically and politically significant for WGS, and suggests a problem of understanding that must be accounted for. As Susan Babbitt describes it, unpacking a problem of understanding entails first examining how "dominant expectations"—about rationality, subjectivity, narrative style, or form—tend to "rule out the meaningfulness of important struggles" and impede their ability to be understood (2001, 298). Some discourses "are not able to be heard" (300); they seem unimaginable because of power asymmetries and injustices (308). Moreover, this implausibility is rarely questioned. Often, "people *think* they have understood ... when they have not in fact understood what most needs to be understood" (303), so that, any difficulty in understanding (i.e., that there is something important that is still *not yet understood* from a normative stance) and the fundamental differences in worldview are thereby put to the side. The alternative way of seeing becomes characterized merely as different or illogical: its meaning is flattened. I would argue that intersectionality's recursiveness signifies the degree to which its practices go against the grain of prevailing conceptualizations of personhood, rationality, and liberation politics, even in WGS.

Problems of Understanding and Nominal Use

To better illustrate how elusive this shift in thinking can be, and because I am interested in well-intended applications of intersectionality that fall short, I first turn to two texts that are widely taught in Women's and Gender Studies. One is Marilyn Frye's essay, "Oppression"—regularly included across the WGS curriculum because Frye's delineation of systemic "double-binds" (1983, 2) is useful. A companion text is Alison Bailey's article, "Privilege," wherein she asks why "students who otherwise embrace Frye's analysis become reluctant to extend it to cover their

own unearned advantages,” suggesting they may not fully “understand oppression as the product of systematically related barriers and forces not of one’s own making” (1998, 104).⁴ Both Frye and Bailey seek to examine gender oppression as interlocking with other systems of oppression and privilege. As Bailey explains, since “oppression is not a unified phenomenon,” in order “to understand how oppression is experienced . . . , it is not necessary for social groups to have fixed boundaries” (106). Yet despite their important contributions to examining oppression, and notwithstanding their intent to focus on how gender is interwoven with race, class, and sexuality, both authors (differently) slip away from developing the multifaceted analyses they set out to undertake.

For example, Frye concludes her essay with a gender-universal analysis of patriarchy that posits the divide between men and women as primary, since, she argues, “men” are never denigrated or oppressed “as men.” Frye explains, “whatever assaults and harassments [a man] is subject to, being male is not what selects him for victimization; . . . men are not oppressed *as men*” (1983, 16). To be taken up, Frye’s analysis requires a form of “pop-bead” logic (Spelman 1988, 136, 186), wherein the gender “bead” of masculinity can be pulled apart from race, sexuality, social class, and other factors. Masculinity seems, therefore, not to be impacted by or intersected with disability, race, sexuality, or citizenship status, in an inextricable, dynamic way.

This atomization of multiplicity is also evident in that Frye is confident, in analyzing the politics of anger or of the smile, that “it is [her] being a woman that reduces the power of [her] anger to a proof of [her] insanity” (1983, 16). Perhaps Frye can presume it is her “being a woman” alone that is causal because she is white, able-bodied, and middle class—since people who are marked as “different” by means of race, disability, and social class, for instance, are also often stereotyped as more irrationally “angry” than are members of privileged groups. Some women are perceived as “angrier” (or as inappropriately angry) in comparison to other women; likewise, some women are expected to show docility or compliance via smiles or silences to other women because of intertwined factors of (and asymmetries of power related to) race, class, sexuality, and ability.

Additionally, Frye’s analysis of how women’s dependency (4, 7–10) is derogated (while structurally reinforced) obscures how different forms

of gendered dependency are differently derogated because gender is not isolatable from other facets of identity. Some forms of dependence (heteronormative, middle class) are more idealized (e.g., women's dependence on men who are their fathers or husbands for protection and care), whereas others are stigmatized as deviant and in need of remediation (e.g., poor women's dependency on the state via welfare). Both types of institutionalized dependency can be understood as oppressive, but differently so; one carries social stigma, the other social approval (even if, as feminist scholars, we may think it should not). Throughout her analysis of the workings of oppression, Frye includes reference to (and seeks to acknowledge) differences among women (of race, class, and sexuality), yet reverts to statements about women as a general group and to analyses of gender processes as not only homogenized but also isolatable from other factors and processes.

Like Frye, Bailey also falls back at times on gender universals when referencing group dynamics. She claims "men" are automatically granted the unearned privileges of protector status, authority, and credibility, and are therefore more likely to be perceived as better leaders (1998, 116). Bailey obscures how other aspects of one's personhood (and of other systems of privilege or oppression) mitigate "men's" authority and credibility. To be a male who is nonwhite, working class, disabled, gay, and/or a noncitizen means one is *not* automatically perceived as an authority figure. As Devon Carbado explains in examining his own unearned privileges as a black, heterosexual male, his "relationship to patriarchy is ... not the same as for a working class Black male," a middle-class white male, or a queer male, black or white (1999, 430). However Bailey's return to a gender binary between "women and men" in her analysis of oppression and privilege obscures such nuances.

Other forms of slippage away from intersectionality are evident in Bailey's analysis, even as she astutely shows how unearned privileges and earned advantages are interrelated (e.g., in redlining practices in real estate) (1998, 109). She also underscores how some *earned* advantages are more easily acquired if accompanied by *unearned* gender, race, class, able-bodied, or heterosexual privileges, hence the "wildcard" quality of "additional perks" inherent to unearned dominant group privileges (108, 114–116). Yet this complex view of the matrices of privilege and oppression is undermined in Bailey's reference to an Andrew Hacker teaching

exercise she finds “particularly effective ... to illustrate the extent to which whites unconsciously understand the wild card character of white privilege” (114). As Bailey explains, Hacker:

asks his white students to imagine that they will be visited by an official they have never met. The official informs them that his organization has made a terrible mistake and that according to official records you were to have been born black. Since this mistake must be rectified immediately, at midnight you will become black and can expect to live out the rest of your life—say fifty years—as a black person in America. Since this is the agency’s error, the official explains that you can demand compensation. Hacker then asks his white students: How much financial recompense would you request? The figures white students give in [Bailey’s] classes—usually between \$250,000 to \$50 million—demonstrates the extent to which white privilege is valued. (114)

Unfortunately, Bailey does not address the exercise’s fundamental assumptions—e.g., to be black is so negative as to require compensation. Not only does this exercise reify the notion of blackness as horrifying, homogenize the experience of “being black,” and implicitly require the emotion of pity (which usually combines with power asymmetries in poisonous ways) to function cognitively as a teaching moment, it also implies that black students would need to consent to the horror of their own being to participate in the exercise.⁵ Moreover, Bailey’s discussion of Hacker’s exercise ignores positive ways to “be black” in this country: longstanding cultural traditions, faith practices and theological views, community practices, and artistic and literary legacies are excluded from the exercise’s parameters. Paradoxically, it reinforces a white imaginary, one predicated on dominance, to try to teach about (and attempt to undo) white privilege.

Such slippages away from intersectional analysis are sites of epistemological struggle. In other words, the dynamics I have discussed in Frye’s and Bailey’s essays are not unique, though they illustrate a wider set of practices; many important texts used (and useful) for introducing and teaching key concepts in WGS (such as oppression as a systemic

and social factor) simultaneously aim to employ a multiplicative analysis and to examine compoundedness, yet take up a “pop-bead” approach instead. Examples of such slippage are equally prevalent in recent debates concerning intersectionality and research methods where, unfortunately, researchers often use intersectionality nominally rather than analytically.

By *nominal use*, I mean when a study is intersectional in name only, intersectional primarily at the level of the descriptive, or, even worse, when intersectionality is simply a “dummy” factor or faddish signpost. Rather than being employed to guide feminist research, shape theoretical questions, develop claims, or interpret data, much research utilizes intersectionality merely for descriptive or demographic factors. As Shields discusses, “Moving from the description of difference/similarity to explanation of processes is a challenge.... It is neither an automatic nor easy step to go from *acknowledging* linkages among social identities to *explaining* those linkages or the processes through which intersecting identities define and shape one another” (2008, 304). Shields underscores that, too frequently, “The end result is to mention the newer view of difference, but to continue to work in the same way as always” (306).

Catherine Harnois examines similar dynamics in studies that employ gender universalism to explore “women’s relationship with feminism” across racial groups. She finds that researchers assume this relationship to be “the same for women of different racial or ethnic groups,” and that “a woman’s relationship with feminism can be measured by a particular set of indicators that themselves do not vary across racial groups” (2005, 810). Several studies exclude “the possibility that particular characteristics and life experiences might affect women of different racial and ethnic groups in different ways.... [such that] generational differences, income and educational levels, family forms, and involvement with the paid labor force might shape women’s feminist identities differently, depending on their race and ethnicity” (810). Differences related to age, family structure, social class, and sexuality are thereby elided. Harnois concludes: “Each of these studies includes race only as a dummy variable, and in none of these studies is race allowed to interact with any other independent variable” (810). Moreover, unstated assumptions about gender and feminism obscure how predictors for “the salience of feminism in women’s lives” were off target vis-à-vis black women: “self-

identification,” a commonly used measure of feminist identity, turned out to be an unreliable “indicator of how ‘feminist’ Black women are” (819). Likewise, using “attitudinal or ideological variables to measure the salience of feminism in women’s lives is also problematic” because feminism does not have only one meaning or history (812).⁶

Another form of nominal use occurs when researchers try to employ intersectionality, but do so selectively, such that the research design contradicts many of intersectionality’s key ideas.⁷ In analyzing qualitative studies about black lesbians (including her own previous work), Lisa Bowleg exposes common errors in identity research. Although intersectionality highlights how identities are interconnected and cannot be ranked or isolated, researchers seeking to understand complex identity tend to rely on interview methods predicated on singularity not compoundedness. Bowleg concludes: if you “ask an additive question, [you] get an additive answer,” in which participants rank or separate out identities in order to answer research questions (2008, 314). Additive approaches in research design suppress the ability of participants to discuss and analyze the “interdependence and mutuality of identities” (316).

Reflecting back on her earlier research, Bowleg remarks: “It is obvious now in retrospect that a truly intersectional question would simply ask the respondent to tell about her experience without separating each identity”; as Bowleg had done when she asked participants the following: “what would you say about your life as a black person?; Woman?; Lesbian?; and Black lesbian woman?” (2008, 315). Similarly, Ange-Marie Hancock contends: “an intersectional approach would not simply expand to a typology of discrete racial/ethnic groups within the category. Most importantly, intersectional approaches to collecting and analyzing data would attend to issues of hybridity or multiraciality recognizing the contingency” of both group and individual identity (2007, 73).

Moreover, as Bowleg demonstrates, if the focus is on intersectionality as relevant primarily to demographics, then key “dimensions of experience,” including “meaningful constructs such as stress, prejudice, [and] discrimination,” are not engaged with by researchers (2008, 316), and the contexts of lived experience (both micropolitical and macropolitical) are positioned as beyond the scope of research (320). Julia Jordan-Zachery agrees that leaving out background contexts remains a problem

in current intersectionality research, despite intersectionality's focus on the contextual and the lived. Like Bowleg, Jordan-Zachery critiques the use of additive models of identity and the reliance on apolitical views of intersectionality that curtail its potential impact both in terms of knowledge production and social change. Jordan-Zachery contends that the implied separation of knowledge from power falsely characterizes intersectional analysis as divorced from social transformation, which is troubling given its roots in liberation politics (2007, 261).

Thus, despite notions that intersectionality is widely (and adequately) used in WGS scholarship, these examples—illustrating depoliticized notions of intersectionality, analyses obscuring interaction across (and the simultaneity of) systems of power, and slippages to (falsely) universalized or “pop-bead” notions of identity that suppress the mutual interaction of identity categories—suggest otherwise. I am not proposing one “right” way to read intersectional theories or devise intersectional methods, nor am I advocating that the field have a singular or “core” set of principles revolving around intersectionality (especially as intersectionality questions universalizing impulses). My concern is that intersectionality is being tokenized, evaded, or characterized as outmoded before its full impact has unfolded. I am also troubled by ahistorical interpretations and acontextual uses of intersectionality, and find myself asking: why does it seem that intellectual innovations (such as intersectionality) devised in large part by women of color continue to be treated casually?⁸ Why are the intellectual histories behind such theoretical innovations (or interventions) regularly bracketed or ignored?

A Snapshot of Intersectionality

Rather than assume “everyone understands intersectionality,” I want to pause to summarize some of its central insights. Intersectionality calls for analytic methods, modes of political action, and ways of thinking about persons, rights, and liberation informed by multiplicity. It is both metaphorical and material, in that it seeks to capture something not adequately named about the nature of lived experience and about systems of oppression. Intersectionality adds nuance to understanding different sites of feminism(s) and the multiple dimensions of lived experience, it lends insight into the interrelationships among struggles

for liberation, and, as Maparyan indicates elsewhere in this volume, it shifts what “counts” as a feminist issue and what is included as gendered experience. Intersectionality offers a vision of future possibilities that can be more fully realized once a shift toward the multiple takes place. Its critical practices include:

- *Considering lived experience as a criterion of meaning:* Intersectionality focuses on how lived experience can be drawn upon to expose the partiality of normative modes of knowing (often deemed neutral) and to help marginalized groups articulate and develop alternative analyses and modes of oppositional consciousness, both individually and collectively.⁹
- *Reconceptualizing marginality and focusing on the politics of location:* Intersectionality considers marginalization in terms of social structure and lived experience and redefines “marginality as a potential source of strength,” not merely “tragedy” (Collins 1998, 128). Lugones and Price insist that the marginalized, “create a sense of ourselves as historical subjects, not exhausted by intermeshed oppressions” (2003, 331). While hooks characterizes the margins as a “site of radical possibility, a space of resistance” (1990, 149), Lugones describes marginality as a site of the “resistant oppressed” wherein “you have ways of living in disruption of domination” (2006, 78, 79). Methodologically, attending to the politics of location entails accounting for the contexts of knowledge production (Bowleg 2008, 318; Jordan-Zachery 2007, 259) and thinking about the relevance of the knower to the known—factors usually considered outside the realm of knowledge “proper.”¹⁰
- *Employing “both/and” thinking and centering multiracial feminist theorizing:* Moving away from “dichotomized” thought (Lugones 1990, 80) and “monolithic” analyses of identity, culture, and theory (Christian 1990a, 341), intersectionality theorizes from a position of “simultaneity” (Nash 2008, 2; V. Smith 1998, xv).¹¹ Bridging the theoretical and empirical (McCall 2005, 1780), and using “double vision” (Lugones 2006, 79), intersectionality “refers to both a normative theoretical argument *and* an approach to conducting empirical research that

emphasizes the interaction of categories” (Hancock 2007, 63). While it is *not* merely the descriptive for which intersectionality was developed, it is often reduced to this.¹² As Shields explains: “Most behavioral science research that focuses on intersectionality ... employs [it] as a perspective on research rather than as a theory that drives the research question.... [Intersectionality’s] emergent properties and processes escape attention” (2008, 304).

- *Shifting toward an understanding of complex subjectivity*: Alongside an epistemological shift toward simultaneity and both/and reasoning is a shift toward subjectivity that accounts for “compoundedness” (Crenshaw 2000, 217); critiques of unitary knowledge and the unitary subject are linked (McCall 2005, 1776). Rather than approach multiple facets of identity as “non-interactive” and “independent” (Harnois 2005, 810), an intersectional approach focuses on indivisibility, a “complex ontology” (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006, 187) conceptualized as woven (Alarcón 1990, 366), kneaded (Anzaldúa 1990e, 380), and shifting (Valentine 2007, 15). This approach “denies any *one* perspective as the only answer, but instead posits a shifting tactical and strategic subjectivity that has the capacity to re-center depending upon the forms of oppression to be confronted” (Sandoval 2000, 67).
- *Analyzing systems of oppression as operating in a “matrix”*: Connected to complex subjectivity are analyses of domination that account for relationships among forms of oppression. As Pauli Murray aptly put it, “The lesson of history that all human rights are indivisible and that the failure to adhere to this principle jeopardizes the rights of all is particularly applicable” (1995, 197). The Combahee River Collective insists on “the development of an integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (1983, 261).¹³ A “single axis” approach “distorts” and “theoretically erases” differences within and between groups (Crenshaw 2000, 209–17); multiple systems of power must therefore be addressed simultaneously.

- *Conceiving of solidarity or coalition without relying on homogeneity*: Rather than sameness as a foundation for alliance, Lorde attests, “You do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other” (1984, 142).¹⁴ Intersectionality pursues “solidarity’ through different political formations and ... alternative theories of the subject of consciousness” (Alarcón 1990, 364). Mohanty advocates thinking about feminist solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together.... [It] is always an achievement, the result of active struggle (2003, 78). This requires acknowledging that marginalization does not mean “we” should “naturally” be able to work together. Lugones urges us to “craft coalitional gestures” both communicatively and politically, since there is no guarantee of “transparency” between us, even margin to margin (2006, 80, 83).
- *Challenging false universals and highlighting omissions built into the social order and intellectual practices*: Intersectionality exposes how the experiences of some are often universalized to represent the experiences, needs, and claims of all group members. Rather than conceptualize group identity via a common denominator framework that subsumes within-group differences, creates rigid distinctions between groups, and leads to distorted analyses of discrimination, intersectionality explores the politics of the unimaginable, the invisible, and the silenced. Intersectionality understands exclusions and gaps as meaningful and examines the theoretical and political impact of such absences.¹⁵
- *Exploring the implications of simultaneous privilege and oppression*: In addition to focusing on the “relational nature of dominance and subordination” (Zinn and Dill 1996, 327)¹⁶ and breaking open false universals, intersectionality focuses on how personhood can be structured on internalized hierarchies or “arrogant perception” (Lugones 1990); thus “one may also ‘become

a woman' in opposition to other women" not just in opposition to "men" (Alarcón 1990, 360).¹⁷ Normative ideas about identity categories as homogenous "limit[s] inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group," and "marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination" (Crenshaw 2000, 209). Intersectionality seeks to shift the logics of how we understand domination, subordination, personhood, and rights.

- *Identifying how a liberatory strategy may depend on hierarchy or reify privilege to operate:* Intersectionality offers tools for seeing how we often uphold the very forms of oppression that we seek to dismantle.¹⁸ For instance, Crenshaw identifies how the court's normative view of race and sex discrimination means that the very legal frameworks meant to address inequality require a certain degree of privilege to function (2000, 213). She lays bare the court's "refusal to acknowledge compound discrimination" (214) and highlights the problem Lugones characterizes as a collusion with divide and conquer thinking (2006, 76).

Conclusion: Intersectionality and Women's and Gender Studies' Future

Ubiquitous reference to intersectionality in Women's and Gender Studies curriculum and scholarship suggests the field has shifted fully to the multidimensional ways of thinking about gender and systems of oppression that are key to intersectional thinking—e.g., that gender is inherently interwoven with the politics, structures, and epistemologies of race, sexuality, social class, disability, and nation. The current literature includes soaring rhetoric about intersectionality and WGS. For instance, Kathy Davis asserts: "At this particular juncture in gender studies, any scholar who neglects difference runs the risk of having her work viewed as theoretically misguided, politically irrelevant, or simply fantastical" (2008, 68). Yet, I maintain that one could: (1) readily find well-regarded venues for WGS scholarship that do not adequately attend to or take up "difference"; and (2) that it would be seen as good work by many rather than dismissed outright as "misguided"

or “irrelevant,” much less “fantastical.” Despite widespread reference to intersectionality in WGS scholarship, it is often employed cursorily. One tendency is to posit intersectionality as something scholars should acknowledge (i.e., an obligation), but a contextualized understanding of the concept is not requisite. Alternatively, intersectionality can be seen as positive but unrealistic—to be achieved in the future, but at present impossible. Thus, even laudatory reference to intersectionality can be fleeting or superficial, which underscores how far the field has to go to fulfill much of intersectionality’s pedagogical, analytical, theoretical, and political promise.

We must ask some difficult questions. Do nods to intersectionality in WGS provide a “conceptual warrant” to avoid, if not suppress, multiplicity? Has intersectionality’s critical lexicon, forged in struggle, been co-opted and flattened rather than engaged with as an epistemological and political lens? We must address the common notion that “everyone” already “does” intersectionality; even if one agrees, for the sake of argument, that “we” all “do” intersectional work, the question remains, *how*? Does intersectionality shape research, pedagogy, or curriculum structure from the start, or is it tacked on or tokenized? How does intersectionality translate into methodology, be it qualitative, quantitative, literary, or philosophical? Is it reduced to a descriptive tool or conceptualized as impossible? Do its key insights slip away, even in well-intended applications? Statements about intersectionality’s having “arrived” beg the question Collins raises when she wonders whether it is being adopted primarily as the latest “overarching” terminology to explain both the matrices of identity and of systems of oppression, but in a way that obscures complexities. She writes: “If we are not careful, the term ‘intersectionality’ runs the ... risk of trying to explain everything yet ending up saying nothing” (2008, 72).

Finally, as Laura Parisi also argues in this volume, it is important to consider whether an evasion of intersectionality can occur by focusing on the transnational. Attending to global feminisms, theorizing transnational politics, and forging comparative practices is pivotal to WGS given the complex flows of global capital, the porosity of borders, and the dangers of “reified nationalisms” (Giddings 2006, v), yet there are cautionary tales; a shift toward the global can frequently take place alongside a sanctioned historical amnesia about localized imbrications

of race and gender. As Karla Holloway notes, “U.S. feminist studies goes looking for transnational bodies while local body-politics are under-interrogated” (2006, 1). Not only do domestic politics of race risk being displaced onto the politics of global gender “elsewhere,” but whiteness itself as “an embodied and gendered politic is effectively disappeared from the interrogative terrain as feminism’s focus on colored bodies goes global” (3). Holloway reiterates: “Although race matters and evidence of ethnicity seem to occupy our academic and political projects, Black folks themselves disappear from view and white folk are protected from analysis.... In transnational paradigms, local bodies seem not to interest U.S. women’s studies” (14). Holloway suggests that an age-old racialized gender politics of U.S. white nationalism seems operative in some of the recent turns to globalization in WGS; this “new” nationalism (in the name of transnationalism) turns on an economy of fear and plays out in the public domain via narratives of danger on the one hand, and the idealization of white womanhood on the other.

Thus, Alexander and Mohanty’s question remains pivotal to thinking through the future implications and past iterations of both transnational *and* intersectional frames: “What kinds of racialized, gendered selves get produced at the conjuncture of the transnational and the neo-colonial?” (2001, 496). As Obioma Nnaemeka points out:

Theorizing in a cross-cultural context is fraught with intellectual, political, and ethical questions: the question of provenance (where is the theory coming from?); the question of subjectivity (who authorizes?); the question of positionality (which specific locations and standing [social, political, and intellectual] does it legitimize?). The imperial nature of theory formation must be interrogated. (2003, 362)

I am calling, then, for a continued focus on intersectionality, but not because intersectionality should become *the* global theory; however, its insights and analyses need not be elided in work that seeks to account more fully for the politics of nation, global flows of power and knowledge, and questions of the neocolonial. At its best, transnational feminist work and intersectional analyses account for multiply constituted subjects and interacting systems of power and inequality, globally and

locally. Transnational feminist theorizing and alliance building will only be strengthened by deep engagement with intersectionality and vice versa. However, to engage with intersectional and transnational analyses simultaneously and adequately, the field must contend with the ways in which each of these political and theoretical turns is too often undertheorized or even resisted outright in much of the work done in the name of Women's and Gender Studies.

Notes

1. Guy-Sheftall traces the historical trajectory of intersectional black feminist thought as an approach and analytical framework even though the term "intersectionality" was not necessarily in use.
2. Connections between liberation politics and the politics of location are explored in several pivotal works, including: Anzaldúa 1990; Cade 1970; Hull, Scott, and B. Smith 1982; Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991; and Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983.
3. See May 2007 and 2009.
4. Ringrose (2007) focuses on how structures of power are intangible for those systemically advantaged by such systems. Since discourses of choice and agency cloud students' ability to analyze systemic and simultaneous privilege and oppression in their own lives and in the larger social world, a focus on intentionality and choice is inadequate without examining how structural determinants bear upon people's lives.
5. My analysis is informed by Patricia Williams' essay, "The Death of the Profane," which examines "color-blind" legal writing and ostensibly color-blind policies and practices, including the use of buzzers in New York boutiques. Williams argues: "the repeated public urgings that blacks understand the buzzer system by putting themselves in shoes of white storeowners" works on an economy of violence and "exclusionary hatred" because it requires that "blacks look into the mirror of frightened white faces for the reality of their undesirability" (1991, 46).
6. See Maparyan's essay on "Feminism," in this volume, for more discussion on feminism's variability.
7. Ringrose contends that intersectionality is "being used in feminist educational spaces in ways that water down the approach and that relativize, individualize, and liberalize issues of oppression and power" (2007, 265), paradoxically favoring meritocracy. Her analysis offers insight with regard to how research designs aimed at employing intersectionality can, analogously, fall short.
8. See Morgensen, in this volume, for more on the ways in which Women's and Gender Studies has failed to follow through on the theorizing of women of color feminisms.

9. See Anzaldúa 1999; Christian 1990; Collins 1990; Crenshaw 2000; Combahee 1983; Guy-Sheftall 1995b.
10. See Anzaldúa 1999; Zinn and Dill 1996, 328; Lugones 2006, 76–78; Sandoval 2000, 86.
11. See Anzaldúa 1990b, 145 and 1990e, 378; Henderson 1989, 117; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006, 187; Sandoval 2000, 88; Yuval-Davis 2007.
12. See Bowleg 2008, 316–18; Hancock 2007, 66; Harnois 2005, 813; Jordan-Zachery 2007, 261.
13. See Beale 1970, 92–93; Collins 2008, 72 and 2004, 95–96; Jordan-Zachery 2007, 259; King 1988; Lemons 2001, 87; Lorde 1984, 140; B. Smith 1983, xxxii–xxviii; Zinn and Dill 1996, 237.
14. See Alarcón 1990, 366; Lemons 2001, 87; B. Smith 1983, xliii.
15. See Alarcón 1990, 356; Bowleg 2008, 312; Crenshaw 2000, 223; A. Davis 1984; DuCille 2001, 254; Henderson 1989, 117; Jordan-Zachery 2007, 254; Ringrose 2007, 267; Sandoval 2000, 75–76.
16. See Anzaldúa 1990d, xix; and Minh-ha 1990, 375.
17. See Crenshaw 2000, 209–13; Lorde 1984, 67, 132; Cole 2008, 446; Lemons 2001, 86–87; Marable 2001, 124; Neal 1995.
18. See Alarcón 1990; Anzaldúa 1990d and 1990e; McCall 2005; Murray 1995; Nnaemeka 2003.