

Revisiting Intersectionality: Reflections on Theory and Praxis

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It is impossible to be familiar with the contemporary field of feminism and gender studies and not be aware of the massive intellectual influence of intersectionality. Having emerged in the late 1980s, intersectionality has now come to be not only *the* way to do feminist research, but has also been exported to other fields and disciplines. Many believe intersectionality has brought about a paradigm shift within gender studies. However, this supposed shift has taken on a performative rather than concrete form.

The use of intersectionality today does not necessarily produce critical research that is vastly distinguishable from previous liberal approaches to gender studies. Instead, the claim to intersectionality is often only a *performance* of both something new and something critical that has increasingly reproduced older approaches to gender research, most notably liberal approaches. In this article, we address this performativity as emerging forms of identity politics that are distinct from intersectionality's initial critical beginnings. We trace some of the ways that intersectionality has become stretched into an approach that fits all feminist ontologies and has thus lost much of this critical potential. It is important to clarify that we address intersectionality as a body of scholarly work, mostly produced in the academy, that has had impact on the ways intersectionality has evolved within activist movements.

Intersectionality's Genealogy

The genealogy of intersectionality is an important part of this story. Indeed, there have been endless debates about what intersectionality in fact *is*. Some scholars have argued that intersectionality should be seen as a grand theory (Davis 2008) and others have even posited it as a new paradigm of research (Walgenbath 2010). Kimberle Crenshaw envisioned it as a *metaphor*, a distinctly divergent interpretation (1991). Crenshaw often uses the imagery of a crossroads to explain intersectionality:

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Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group tries to navigate the main crossing in the city...the main highway is “racism road.” One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street. She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression, (Crenshaw in Yuval-Davis 2006: 196).

Intersectionality emerged as a response to the feminist claim that women constituted a universal category. While the term itself was only coined in the 1980s, black feminists scholars have been conceptualizing identity as being formed by interlocking vectors of race, gender, class and sexuality for decades (Nash 2008, 3). It is important to note the pivotal role Black feminists have played in intersectionality’s genesis. Intersectionality represented an intervention against white liberal feminism that sidelined “race” as an unimportant aspect of feminist research. The hegemony of this type of feminism is precisely what inspired Crenshaw—via the legal justice system in the United States—to question the assumptions underlying the field as a whole. Black feminists such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins have repeatedly called for the centering of race among other social categories of analysis, pointing out that gender should not be the sole lens through which feminists understand social relations.

Despite these beginnings that held much critical promise, it soon became clear that there were a number of problems with the way in which intersectionality was being conceptualized. The first of these is its ambiguity and open-endedness. Intersectionality’s open-endedness has long been celebrated as one of its best features. However, it is useful to posit the question of whether open-endedness is indeed a positive attribute of an approach that aims at critical research.

Intersectionality calls for research that looks at the intersections of social categories or identities, that does not have a clear methodological preference. This has led to two problems: One is that it is not enough to study the ways in which social categories intersect without looking at how these categories are themselves constituted. The second problem is that this methodological ambiguity—which in some sense could be seen as a positive call to embrace varying epistemologies—also meant that feminists with contradictory ontological assumptions have been able to all work under the umbrella of intersectionality.¹ As such, feminists working with liberal assumptions have also been able to use intersectionality in their research and thus reproduce the strength of identity politics. This is problematic because it takes away from the critical potential of intersectionality and simply renders it another approach to gender that is non-transformative.

¹ For an extensive overview of these works, see: Carbin and Edenheim 2013; Bilge 2013.

Another problem that manifests more recently is the increasing ‘whitening’ of intersectionality (Bilge 2013). Race was central to the initial articulations of intersectionality. Crenshaw consistently articulated the centrality of race to her conception of critical feminist research, and insisted that whiteness was a structural barrier to the production of gender research that was non-hegemonic. Crenshaw has written about the ways in which black women have been re-marginalized even though race was a central conception in her articulation of intersectionality. “There is a sense that efforts to repackage intersectionality for universal consumption require a re-marginalizing of black women. This instinct reflects a fatal transmission error of ‘Demarginalizing’s’ central argument: that representations of gender that are ‘race-less’ are not by that fact alone more universal than those that are race-specific,” (Crenshaw 2001, 224). In order for this “repackaging of intersectionality for universal consumption” to happen, there needed to first be a re-marginalization of black women. This process, which Sirma Bilge has referred to as ‘whitening’ (although Bilge means it in a broader sense), is a central aspect of the dilution of intersectionality. Bilge writes:

These patterns all participate in annexing intersectionality to disciplinary feminism and decentering the constitutive role of race in intersectional thought and praxis. What I mean by “whitening intersectionality” does not refer to the embodiment, skin color or heritage of its practitioners, nor does it attempt to police the boundaries of who can legitimately do intersectionality and who cannot. Whether scholars are “whitening intersectionality” refers to ways of doing intersectional work in the political economy of genealogical and thematic re-framings, in the citational practices, and in the politics of canonicity (2013, 412).

Bilge notes that the ‘whitening’ of intersectionality occurs through two moves: claiming that intersectionality is the brainchild of feminism, and attempts to broaden the genealogy of intersectionality (Ibid). The former erases the role of race in intersectionality’s beginnings and the ways in which intersectionality was very much a form of resistance *against* feminism, which was then (as now, arguably) dominated by liberal feminism. The latter attempts to pose alternative genealogies of intersectionality that highlight different inspirations and thus also remove race from intersectionality’s beginnings (Ibid, 416).

The Neoliberal Academy

There are unclear aspects of what intersectionality *is* to begin with, namely whether it is a theory, metaphor or paradigm, as well as what its precise methodological attributes are. It is precisely these unclear aspects that can explain how intersectionality got co-opted along the line and became a “catch-all” approach. Another part of this story is the neoliberal academy and the ways in which this has promoted certain norms of knowledge production above

others. The neoliberal academy forms the space where most scholarly debates about intersectionality have taken place and is therefore crucial to probe.

Sirma Bilge addresses the question of neoliberalism and intersectionality:

Neoliberal assumptions create the conditions allowing the founding conceptions of intersectionality to become diluted, disciplined, and disarticulated. Intersectionality, originally focused on transformative and counter-hegemonic knowledge production and radical politics of social justice, has been commodified and colonized for neoliberal regimes. A depoliticized intersectionality is particularly useful to a neoliberalism that reframes all values as market values: identity-based radical politics are often turned into corporatized diversity tools leveraged by dominant groups to attain various ideological and institutional goals; a range of minority struggles are incorporated into a market-driven and state-sanctioned governmentality of diversity; “diversity” becomes a feature of neoliberal management, providing “managerial precepts of good government and efficient business operations”; knowledge of “diversity” can be presented as marketable expertise in understanding and deploying multiple forms of difference simultaneously—a sought-after signifier of sound judgment and professionalism (2013, 407).

Bilge makes it clear that the *conditions* produced by the neoliberalization of the university are precisely what has diluted intersectionality. Indeed Bilge’s position is that intersectionality was initially an intervention with much radical potential. Thus, it becomes necessary to locate the changes within the academy since intersectionality came about, as part of an effort to understand how intersectionality became diluted.²

Chandra Mohanty addresses the central question of how the neoliberalization of the academy affects feminist scholarship (2013). What is unique about Mohanty’s intervention is that she highlights the role of postmodern scholarship and the ways in which it distracts from structural forms of oppression. Mohanty sets out to address the dismissal of systemic analysis on the grounds that it cannot address internal conflicts within systems, and argues that “this particular postmodernist position converges with the proliferation of depoliticized multiplicities that is a hallmark of neoliberal intellectual landscapes,” (Ibid, 968). Postmodern scholarship has long been averse to grand narratives or a focus on structural analyses of power, seeing them as essentialist and reductionist. Mohanty writes of “the familiar postmodernist argument where ‘differences

² Notably, the 1980s, the period during which intersectionality emerged, was the endpoint of several decades of radical activism within and outside of the academy in the Global North. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, this was being crushed by the advance of neoliberal ideas and policies with significant effect in academic institutions. It is therefore not surprising that by the late 2000s, this advance would have had significant effects on fields of critical studies such as feminism.

within' always trump critical analyses of dominant discourses, leading to a refusal to identify the existence of a hegemonic feminism that has systematic effects on marginalized communities," (983). However, as Mohanty points out, by neglecting the structural or the universal, it becomes difficult to address questions of imperialism, national liberation, and capitalism. It has become commonplace to hear calls to not generalize, essentialize, or create binaries between East and West (for example). These calls perform a call to complexity and to abandon over-simplification. However, this has the parallel effect of emphasizing "internal differences" over hegemonic structures.

It is useful to bring together the critiques made by Mohanty about feminist studies in general with the critiques made by Bilge, Carbin, and Edenheim about intersectionality, in particular. All of these pieces focus on neoliberalism as a key factor in explaining the de-radicalizing of feminist scholarship. What is notable about Mohanty's piece is that it brings in postmodernism as another part of the story: postmodernism, as an approach tied to the neoliberalization of the academy, is also responsible for this de-radicalizing, because it has taken attention (and validity) away from more structural understandings of oppression. This raises the question of how postmodernism and its increasing popularity have affected intersectionality, and vice versa.

As Bilge, Carbin, and Edenheim show, the context of the academy has been central to diluting intersectionality. As Mohanty writes, postmodern skepticism of intersectionality "converts what originated as a compelling theory of the interwoven structures and inequities of power to an inert theory of identity that emphasizes difference over commonality, coalition, and contestation," (2013, 974). This conversion is key, as it means we are back to identity politics minus power relations.

One important point is the connection between the radical social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the critical knowledge that they produced.³ This connection means that the reduction in critical knowledge is linked to the demise of these radical movements. This not only breaks down the false distinction between activism and the academy, but also demonstrates the need to look more closely at these social movements in order to understand the type of knowledge that was being produced because of the work they were doing. It seems clear that these movements were focused on structural forms of oppression and that they saw the need to dismantle, prime among them capitalism, racism, sexism and imperialism.⁴

³ See in particular Delia Aguilar (2013).

⁴ The focus on imperialism was less notable than on capitalism and racism in the Global North (aside from the focus on Vietnam) but was a central locus of movements in the Global South.

Understanding what happened to these movements is key to understanding what happened to critical knowledge production that was *structural* in focus. This is due to the personalization and individualization of oppression, whereby experiences and one's standpoint become the locus of analysis. "Questions of oppression and exploitation as collective, systematic processes and institutions of rule that are gendered and raced have difficulty being heard when neoliberal narratives disallow the salience of collective experience or redefine this experience as a commodity to be consumed" (Ibid). These shifts are clear within feminist studies, whereby one's experience has become increasingly important, even leading to an entire ontological shift whereby "standpoint" analysis was in vogue.

Despite the limitations of these shifts, it is still important to contextualize them as responses to the hegemony of liberal, Western feminism that claimed to speak for a universal woman. Standpoint became a way of resisting such a move by emphasizing the uniqueness of experience. However, it seems that this shift went to the other extreme of focusing on individual experience *at the expense* of simultaneously analyzing how structures condition experiences in both universal and particular ways. This is where a Marxist analysis can be most useful, as it allows for a focus on the universal and particular *simultaneously*.

What is often missing from such analyses is the focus on the *political economy* of oppression. As Mohanty notes, "This representational, discursive politics of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation, disconnected from its materialist moorings, can thus be consumed more easily in institutional spaces," (2013, 972). This disconnection is what is crucial. As Delia Aguilar notes, the ways in which "class" is discussed has increasingly become non-materialist: "At this point, we have effectively moved to the realm of discourse with less and less material anchor," (2013). We argue that the lack of a material anchor is directly connected to the decrease in the acceptability of structural analysis.

State Violence and the Need for Conscious Feminist Praxis: Looking at California

The need for conscious feminist praxis arises within the context of police killing young people of color. A contradictory paradigm of Feminism⁵ dually emerges with the rise of class domination in the university context--what we refer to as the neoliberal university--in which a *disciplining* Feminist approach towards black men's sexism and misogyny results in forms of anti-black racism. The contradictory consciousness of this Feminist paradigm emerges also within

⁵ This section denotes Feminism as the hegemonic gender logic within the neoliberal, capitalist academy, while we conceptualize feminism as a move towards the disruption of this logic.

academic and activist milieus in which applying intersectionality holds righteous, ideological currency that ostensibly suggests race, gender, and class-consciousness of oppressed women. This section probes a specific question in relation to this, namely: how do we make sense of this contradictory paradigm in which anti-black racism confronts the ideological constructs of race, gender, and class-consciousness?

This section makes two arguments. First, we problematize current ‘critical’ approaches to gender justice within political activism and within the university. The argument is that despite the intellectual gains of women of color theorists, who were responding to the political demands of students and anti-colonial movements globally and the demands against producing knowledge that served the ends of imperialist domination, strategic categories of “race” and “identity politics” that have since emerged from within the university have themselves been co-opted into the logic of neoliberal forms of class domination through the very commodification of those terms.⁶

Secondly, within this commodified, and self-commodifying, production of critical studies of gender justice that propose to unearth systemic racial and gender inequalities, these forms of ‘critical’ studies have failed us precisely because we are unable to rupture our thinking from the hegemonic ways in which our categories and frameworks maintain the status quo. We face a problem of language and strategy that calls for a serious and rigorous investigation of the classificatory logics of gender opposition and liberal, Feminist reformism.⁷ We understand that these logics define our current set of “inner eyes”⁸ that has become mainstream within the capitalist, neoapartheid university, that we now confront.

This section centers on making sense of dynamics in which questions of feminism and gender came up within political organizing spaces and within the American academy. In each instance, the irony of creating ‘safe’ spaces where one can ‘voice’ one’s position, critique, or one’s experience, was met with a silence that instead bred an impossibility to actually having a conversation that, while it may not have left us feeling comfortable, had potential for dialectical forward movement.

⁶ See Wynter, Sylvia. "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Desetre*: Black Studies Toward the Human Project," in Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, eds., *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*. Eds. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon. Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006, 107-171.

⁷ Liberal feminism is an individualistic form of feminist theory, which primarily focuses on women's ability to show and maintain their equality through their own actions and choices.

⁸ See Ellison, Ralph. 1995. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage International.

The first example comes from Oakland, California. A Bay Area community event debuted a film about Lovelle Mixon where, in a police shootout, Mixon killed four officers and was left bullet-ridden. The movie, *The Ghosts of March 21*,⁹ was followed by a panel discussion. In an attempt to draw connections between ongoing police repression of oppressed working class people, and challenges to pervasive government surveillance, a panel member discussed ‘rape’ as a patterned tool of state violence used historically, and presently, to arrest the possibilities of collective resistance to capitalist domination and suppression of poor and working people.

The elder black panel speaker at *The Ghosts of March 21* film screening launched a complaint about the state’s ability to use Feminists to fracture collective resistance. Upon offering his critique of Feminist groups who, he believed, had played into the state’s divisive tactics, a group of mixed-race, though predominantly white, Feminists who were attending the film screening stood up in an upset and left the event in the midst of the panel. This patronizing demonstration of self-righteous discontent took place in a community where Lovelle Mixon continues to be considered by many residents as a community hero.¹⁰

The inability of these Feminist activists to build solidarity with Oakland’s poor, black community was pronounced. In a context in which radical, left activists and community residents from Oakland’s most disenfranchised neighborhoods had come together to speak about the issue of the state-sanctioned, extra-legal criminalization and execution of a young, black men, and the whole scale anti-black repression of poor, communities, the image of the hurried exit of the group of Feminist activists leaves one confused.

The second instance that I present draws on the first as a symptomatic effect of ways that the class domination centered, neoliberal academy enforces a hegemonic consciousness around Feminist approaches to race and gender. This Feminist approach in the university context matter when we think about the stakes involved in formulating theoretical language—meaning systems that effect behavior-regulatory schemas that have ‘material’ effects in our everyday world (Wynter 2006).

⁹ Stoker, Sam. (2014) *The Ghosts of March 21st*. [Documentary]. United States: Independent; see also <http://sfbayview.com/2014/02/the-ghosts-of-march-21-an-interview-wit-filmmaker-sam-stoker/>;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpbPvnXRNRa>;
<https://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2009/04/15/18589103.php>

¹⁰ For an analysis on the coloniality of power and the condemnation of black life to a perpetual state of violence through the symbol of Lovelle Mixon, see George Barganier forthcoming “We Ain’t Goin For It!: Lovelle Mixon and the Struggle Against Non-Being” 2015.

We may be able to see the symptoms of the previously described instance show itself within the academy at a well-attended symposium on girls and violence at Boalt Law School where black feminist thinkers elaborated on the structural effect of policing and incarceration experienced by poor, black women in the United States. The aim of the symposium was to generate discussion about the silence of violence experienced by black girls and women, and to offer a framework for breaking the silence about gendered interpersonal, institutional and *cultural* violence. We return to the focus on the ‘silence’ of racial violence and the implications of its contradiction in a neoliberal, Feminist paradigm that *intersectionally* recognizes race, class, and gendered axes of oppression, but fails to think outside of the current logic of domination, thereby reproducing this logic in anti-black forms.

Throughout the symposium, gendered violence was defined as any physical, emotional and/or sexual attack against a person based on the person’s gender or gender identity, perpetrated by individuals, the legal system, and by the *culture*, itself. While the concrete impact of housing, employment, and police harassment on the lives of black women were addressed at the symposium, the material effects of oppression sharply contrasted the opening tone of the symposium, which featured the silenced violence of black female rape victims and positioned the experiences of black women in opposition to black men who brutalized them. Specific discussion around what *cultural* notions of violence entailed was left untouched, save what was implied by the opening tone of the symposium and the debuting of a rape documentary that indicated black women’s refusal to air their intimate laundry.

The tensions between structural and cultural notions of violence loomed largely, and was oftentimes conflated amongst progressive and liberal, renowned academics of color, as well as legal and nonprofit practitioners who discussed the empirical effects of violence experienced by vulnerable black women. Numerous symposium participants were left confused and conflicted about how to address the violence of racism alongside the pathologies of race that saturated symposium conversations about the violated experiences of black women by black men.

The contradictory consciousness of this Feminist approach emerged in an academic, legal and nonprofit milieu in which the application of intersectionality held ideological currency around categories of race, gender, and class oppression. The misstep, though, of the entire endeavor was the absence of an assertion, and even a consciousness, about unpacking notions of cultural violence. This left any framework of movement building bereft of theoretical and political substance. How do we make sense of this contradictory paradigm in which even intra-racial forms of anti-black, *-isms* confront an assumed and performed race, gender, and class-consciousness?

Towards Conscious Feminist Praxis

“We must learn why we have loved our chains and not wanted to throw them off. Only we, the politically conscious oppressed, can find out how we were molded, brainwashed, and literally produced like any manufactured product to plastically cooperate in our oppression. This is our historical responsibility.” –Patricia Robinson, Patricia Haden, and Donna Middleton (1973), *Lessons from the Damned*, “*The Revolt of Poor Black Women*.”

In an open letter to her colleagues after the jury acquittal of the policemen in the Rodney King beating, Sylvia Wynter (1992) Professor Emeritus at Stanford University, stated that public officials of the judicial system of Los Angeles routinely used the acronym, ‘N.H.I.’ to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young, jobless, inner city black men. N.H.I. meant “No Humans Involved.” Arguing in line with Stephen Jay Gould that “systems of classification direct our thinking and order our behaviors,” Wynter questions where such a system of classification could come from to such the extent that it was actively used by judicial officers of Los Angeles (Wynter 1992: 13-16).

In the neoliberal university context, what have we had to do with the putting in place of certain logics, of the shared modes of subjective and material understandings of those “inner eyes” and where have we become short-sighted? This question stands in the face of diluted identity politics that reify categories of race and gender in ways that legitimate and are exploited by the neoliberal state.

Angela Davis (1981) reminds us of the “painful irony that some anti-rape theorists who ignore the part played by racism in instigating rape, do not hesitate to argue that men of color are especially prone to commit sexual violence against women” even when the myth of the black rapist has been “methodically conjured up whenever recurrent waves of violence and terror against the Black community have required convincing justifications” (Davis 1981: 177-178). The disparity between actual instances of sexual assault and those reported by the police, reflects public tendency to “equate the ‘police blotter rapist’ with the ‘typical rapist’...” thus making it impossible to excavate the real social causes of rape with the bombardment of the ‘image making power’ enforced by the institution of policing (Ibid 173).

Historically, the institution and license to rape grew out of and facilitated the economic exploitation and domination of slavery. The historical myth of the black rapist was a *political invention* used as a pretext for the institution of lynching. Further, the characterization of black men as rapists created confusion within the ranks of progressive movements. Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells point out in their analyses of lynching “that as soon as the propagandistic cry of rape became a legitimate excuse for lynching, former white proponents of Black equality became increasingly afraid to associate themselves with Black people’s

struggle for liberation” (Ibid: 188). In the case of Lovelle Mixon and the preponderance of community residents’ support of him, the conspicuous absence of poor, black women within Feminist activist circles, reflected an important reality about the Feminist movement’s ambivalence towards Mixon’s rape charge as a rationale for racist police aggression.

Much like the license to rape black women during slavery for slaveholders’ economic power, our social and class structure protects an incentive to rape, given that “men of the capitalist class and their middle-class partners are immune to prosecution because they commit their sexual assaults with the same unchallenged authority that legitimizes their daily assaults on” everyday people (Ibid. 199-200). According to Davis, however, when poor men irrespective of their color, “accept the invitation to rape,” by “the belief that their maleness accords them the privilege to dominate women;” still, “they do not possess the social and economic authority...guaranteeing them immunity from prosecution,” and so the invitation to rape extended by the ideology of male supremacy is “an illusory compensation for their powerlessness” (Ibid 200).

The supremacy of class domination in the neoliberal university legitimizes the “vigorous impulse” of state violence against racialized groups especially when state institutions exploit widely popularized pathologizing racial constructs of gender violence. Poor black people, by means of criminalization, incarceration, and policing, remain the most exploited group within the racial and labor hierarchy--even in the face of the complex criminalization of poor immigrants.

Treating the egregious violation of rape in isolated terms through a politics of state legal redress fails to capture the complex social context of sexual violence that has been and is constitutive of world capitalism. Thus, the struggle against racism must be a foundational theme in feminist movements against sexual violence, “which must not only defend women of color, but the many victims of the racist manipulation of the rape charge as well” (Ibid 201).

The issue of “race” and its classificatory logic lies in the founding premise on which our present disciplinary order of knowledge and its paradigms’ complicity in legitimizing state violence, are based. Martin Nicolaus (1971) problematizes the practice of the modern social sciences as intricately linked to the privatization and violence of daily life through the university’s formulation and legitimation of “the laws of oppressed social life.”¹¹ Laying out examples of sociology’s incorporation into business management, military and anti-Communist operations,¹² dating back to the 1920s, Nicolaus candidly presents government

¹¹ Nicolaus, Martin. “The Professional Organization of Sociology: A View From Below.” *Radical Sociology*, Colfax and Roach, eds. New York: Basic Books, 1971, p. 48.

¹² For example see Ernst, John (1998). *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press. Jaffe, Adrian;

and corporate interests as woven into the history of modern American social sciences. He presents sociology as *constituting* contractual branches of the political state power structure, distributing propaganda on matters of social reality throughout universities, junior colleges, and secondary schools. Given the ways the neoliberal academy has promoted certain norms of knowledge production above others, a critical problem we face is to be pawns or not, in producing “‘objective’ orders of truth, that is then carried out beyond university walls (Wynter 1996: 311).

The fetishization of identity politics and the universalizing Western notions of identity and race in Feminist consciousness has been utilized by the neoliberal capitalist university, in ways that dangerously reproduces an oppressive racial order rather than in ways that overturn its logic. Rather than situate analyses of gender oppression as a function of the larger global world system and its referential division of labor, a pattern emerges where gender oppression politics become reduced to liberally myopic visions of victimization. Victimization narratives patented by Feminist and mainstream scholars in the academy, scholars “who make space” exploiting a performance of suffering, work to reproduce the division of labor between academics of color who become liberalized thereby widening the gap between a growing black middle class in the academy and the poor jobless people of color outside of it.

Identity politics can be easily co-opted by the power structure. As the university tokenizes us, we resemble individual consumers in a market of self-commodification and receive much career returns and accolades. In addition, in order to fund marketable categories of suffering related to violence, girls, rape, etc., social service, or direct service, nonprofit practice continues to be shaped by a mentality that delimits the scope of structural violence on oppressed people by co-opting the radical terms with which we once made political interventions against state-based racial oppression. It would seem that nonprofits’ deployment of programmatic efforts that address the gendered experiences of girl violence, exemplifies a liberal state agenda that works to demonize a raced’ notion of black male criminality while instrumentalizing the racialized alienation of women of color.

Much like the recognition-based politics of human rights liberal Feminist agendas, the paradigmatic universalizing of the experience of oppression based on phenotypic claims to race or physiognomic claims to gender, irregardless of class differences, produces a fallacy of terms that create traps of discourse and practice and that negate the complexities and the contradictions of poor peoples’ lives. These are the failures of gender identity politics that can erase real people

Scigliano, Robert; Guy H. Fox (1965). *Technical Assistance In Vietnam: The Michigan State University Experience*. New York: Praeger.; *Behavioral Sciences and the National Security: Report No. 4 on Winning the Cold War. The U.S. Ideological Offensive*, 1965.

and simultaneously recognize them as victims, even if they may not necessarily view themselves as such.

Framing the politics of resistance requires an honest look at how black academics, too, are co-opted within forms of racialized, Feminist essentialisms that depoliticize frameworks and strategies through liberal, recognition politics seeking state redress for injuries, as we become middle-class, tokenized pawns of the university.¹³ This co-optation insidiously occurs within a university milieu where race is over-talked about almost to the point of meaning nothing, and where racial discourse embedded in identity politics that are in line with market sensibilities become so commodified and de-contextualized from historical particularities and material realities.

We begin to face the failure of solidarity based on the anti-black politics of Feminist activists and the failures of black academics that present themselves as authorities of disposed groups but espouse a class disdain for those groups. In this reality the privileged, material benefits of careerism in activism and careerism in academia produce the mutual but not exclusive class domination politics of the neoliberal university in a way that promotes ‘identity politics’ within a moral economy of oppression-based, *intersectional* politics that can be easily manipulated by the state.

We must begin the dismantling of practices and systems of apartheid and genocide that prey on the wholesale annihilation of people’s livelihood. This inevitably also means the destruction of imperial exploitation at the level of political organization *and* at the level of theoretical production. Revolutionary resistance entails the intellectual production of a “new science of the human;” a science that enables autopoietic shifts in new “objective” orders of truth that rupture the present disciplinary order of knowledge and its paradigms’ complicity in legitimizing and colluding with state violence.¹⁴ While critiquing gender oppression does have a place within the university, we must enact it *beyond* the liberal, Humanistic logic of present day social sciences’ gender studies (Wynter 1990; Grosfoguel 2012). Importantly, we must not risk defeat by supporting racialized notions of gender that tokenize gender above race absent of a critique of the structure of domination.

Conclusion

“True the Black woman did the housework, the drudgery; true, she reared the children, often alone, but she did all of that while occupying a place on the job market, a place her mate

¹³ See Brown, W. (1995). *States of injury: Power and freedom in late modernity*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

¹⁴ For examples see Rodney, W., Babu, A. M., & Harding, V. (1981). *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*. Washington, D.C: Howard University Press.

could not get or which his pride would not let him accept. And she had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself.” – Toni Morrison. “What the Black Woman Thinks about Women’s Lib.” Morrison, T., & Denard, C. C. (2008). *What moves at the margin: Selected nonfiction*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Given the empirical examples presented, we are convinced that the rise of class domination in what we know as the neoliberal university creates the conditions for concepts like intersectionality to become diluted and commodified. By depoliticizing intersectionality neoliberal market regimes empty radical struggle of structural critiques and translate them into palatable (unthreatening) narratives of social justice, multiculturalisms.

Intellectual production, poetic production, “is not a luxury”. It is “a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action (Lorde 1984: 37). True, there has always been a tension, a problem, in conceiving the relationship between theory and social change work. The absorption of black intellectuals from radical struggles into the growing black middle class is but one example, among many, of the function of the university in reproducing systems of hierarchy and domination.¹⁵

While we respect the utility and rigor of theoretical giants such Marx and Foucault for example, we do not ascribe to the all-too-typical practice of relying on such theoretical works to validate our production or to be taken seriously. Too often, activist theoretical production is not valued in the university. Radical intellectuals such as Audre Lorde, Walter Rodney, Toni Morrison, Sylvia Wynter to name a few, who took risks of the imagination and maintained heretical and ‘uncivil’ positions in universities by challenging the logics of occupation, imperialism and capitalism, nurture our investment in the intellectual work required for social change.

Thus, reflection and action, directed by the relevance of *experience* and a continually evolving ethical critical consciousness¹⁶ will enable a shift out of what is wrong with our modes of education today. Our attention to praxis, the way theories play out on an everyday basis and the ways that the everyday shapes theory is a co-constitutive dialectical process that is so often missing within the neoliberal university. Change then requires a “marriage of thought,” with the emancipatory struggles made by those most excluded from power, those who continually remind us that despite our disciplinary training, “we need not forever remain prisoners of...[academic and disciplinary] prescriptions” (Wynter 1994:

¹⁵ See Wynter 2006

¹⁶ See Dussel (2013)

67). And in this process, feminism can dismantle patriarchy as can Marxism dismantle class domination. As women writers in struggle our intellectual production gives us the opportunity to “name what is nameless so it can be thought,” (Lorde 1984: 37). We brazenly allow our explorations, our erotic sensibilities, that were not meant to survive within “living structures defined by profits, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization,” to direct our political ethos through conscious praxis that enrich and make more possible a humane world (Lorde 1984: 55)

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